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Hello and welcome to the first issue of The Video Game Archeologist, or The VGA for short. Within these pages you'll find nothing but classic game reviews, tons of screen shots, and in some cases artwork from the games. The one thing you won't find are ads (except this one, please buy my book The Sega Master System Game Guide, available on Amazon or at my website www.TheVGATV.com). OK, now that that's out of the way, we can continue.

Since this is a new publication, I figured it would be worthwhile to do an FAQ. Since this is the first issue and I've obviously not received any questions from readers yet, I'm going to ask and answer the questions I figure you have at this point. So I guess this is a Faux FAQ, or FFAQ. At any rate...

Q: You suck as a designer!

A: Well, that's not really a question, but you do make a valid point. As you flip through this publication it is painfully obvious that I'm in not a designer, nor do I claim or desire to be one. My passion is classic video games, not design. I would much rather spend my time focusing on the writing and the screen shots (you know, the content) rather than trying to figure out how to get a drop shadow to hit just right on the page.

Q: How often are you going to release an issue.

A: There is going to be a new edition every two months. It will be available on my site on the first of every other month, and available on Amazon within a week or so (it's out of my hands as to when they get around to putting it up). The second issue is scheduled to come out in November.

Q: $15 sounds like lot for a 70 page book, why should I buy it?

A: On the surface $15 for a 70 page book might sound like a lot, but when you consider that it is 70 pages of nothing but classic gaming content it quickly become evident that it is indeed worth it. Actually when put up against other gaming magazines like Game Informer, $15 for 70 pages worth of gaming coverage is about on par with what they offer. Seriously, look at an issue of Game Informer, now take away the ads, the non gaming related things, and throw out the looks at the same shovelware games they cover every month (i.e. EA sports games, Rock Band/Guitar Hero, etc) and all of a sudden you are going to have to buy multiple issues just to reach 70 pages. Of course if you are looking for classic gaming content you would have to go on ebay and buy all of their old issues since they no longer care about the classics.

Q: Why is this a book and not a magazine?

A: There are two reason. The first reason is cost. By doing it in book form I can keep the price at $15 while keeping a meager profit margin, while if I went the magazine route I would either have to cut pages or bump the price up to $20, which frankly is just too much for a magazine. The second reason is distribution. By using the service that I am, I can sell this book via my website as well as Amazon.com. The book also qualifies for free shipping through Amazon, so when you spend $25 you don't pay for shipping (so say if you bought this and my $10 book on the Sega Master System then you get free shipping).

Q: Does it matter if we buy your books on Amazon or on your site?

A: Well, if you want to get free shipping I would suggest Amazon, although if you want to really support what I'm doing then I would suggest buying through my site since my royalty is higher.

Q: What is your definition of "Classic Gaming"?

A: The short answer is any game from a previous gaming generation. That said, I have a different view on what qualifies as a gaming generation. In my view we are only in the 3rd gaming generation. Allow me to elaborate.

The First Generation was the birth of video games and included such systems as the Atari 2600, ColecoVision, etc. These games were very simplistic both in terms of gameplay and graphics, had very simple controls (a joystick and a single fire button), and for the most part took place on a single screen. This generation ended with the release of the NES.

The Second Generation began with the NES and continued until the release of the Sega Saturn. Why the Saturn? Because it was the first console with a true analog stick, which fundamentally changed the way we played games. Systems in this generation include the NES, SNES, Master System, Genesis, TG-16, Sega CD, etc. If you think about it, the games that came out at the beginning of the NES aren't that much different than the games released near the end of the SNES. Sure the graphics are better and the games are longer a bit more complex, but basically they contain the same play mechanics all the way through. To be more specific, look at Super Mario Brothers then look at Super Mario World. Outside of the graphics and length, is there really much difference in terms of gameplay? Nope.

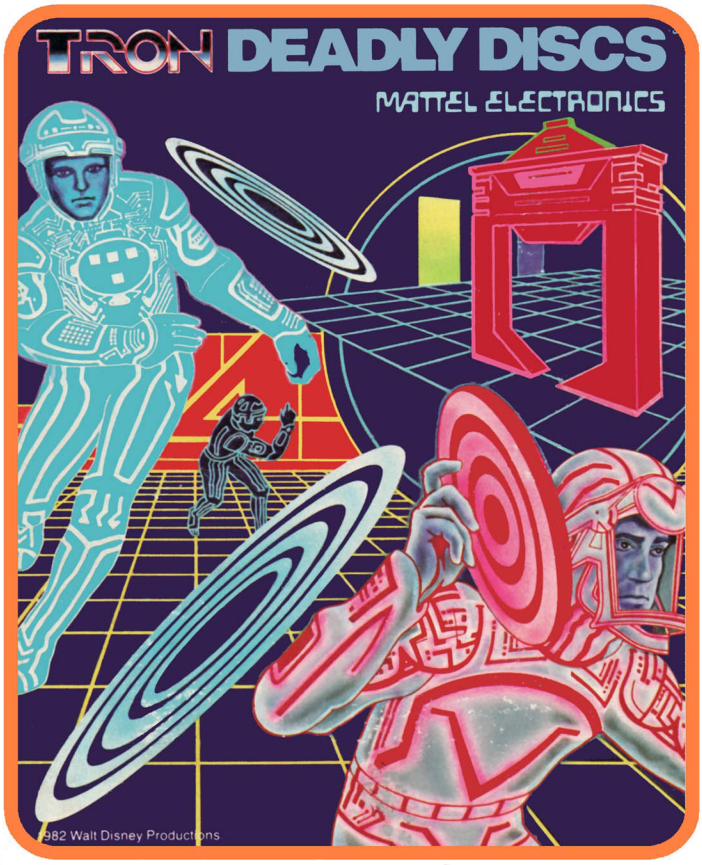
The Third Generation is everything since the implementation of the Analog stick. Again, look at a game like Tomb Raider and compare it to Uncharted and you'll find that there is very little difference in the way the game plays. Now I know that there is a current focus on motion controls with the Wii and the upcoming controllers from Sony and Microsoft, but even those still rely on the analog stick in a lot of cases. It's hard to say if this is the start of the Forth Generation of gaming, or if it is merely Generation 3.1.

Q: So what are you planning on covering?

A: Everything from the first two generations with the primary focus being on the Second Generation with a handful of First Generation games thrown in for good measure. Yes I know that eliminates classic systems like the Saturn and the Dreamcast, but I really want to focus on the systems that played the biggest role in my life. Plus given that there were roughly 2,500 games released in the Second Generation along, there is going to be plenty of material to cover. Also, there is going to be a healthy Japanese section in each issue that will highlight a couple of games that are playable by non-Japanese speakers and a couple of games that look cool enough to warrant learning the language.

So there you go, everything you could possibly want to know about The VGA. Of course if you want to know anything else, just shoot me an email at VgaTV@yahoo.com

Until Issue #2...

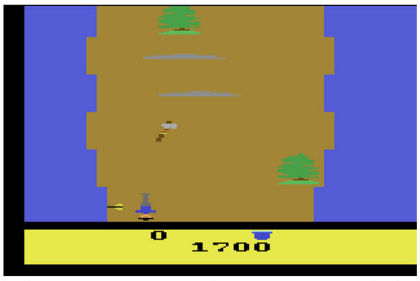


This is one of those rare games that takes a simple premise (Tron fighting in the disc arena) and turns it into a fast paced pedal to the metal gaming experience. Once you start there are no breaks, no levels, no breathers of any kind. You only have one life that can take multiple shots before death and a never ending stream of enemy disc warriors who continually get stronger and stronger.

Enemies will randomly appear in groups of 3 around the outer edges of the arena. Once you kill the first one you have a limited amount of time to get the other two before the one you killed respawns, and if you are able to take out all three quickly enough you are rewarded with a stronger trio that show up with discs a flying. The real challenge comes from the fact that you never know where they are going to pop up next.

As you can imagine the action is frantic. Luckily you have your trusty disc that can plow through multiple enemies on a single throw. Of course if you miss your intended target you are left defenseless while it is in flight, but thankfully you can hit the button mid flight and have it return to you. In addition to the enemies, you can use your disc to destroy the doors they come through. Once you do that, you can use them as an emergency escape route and warp to the other side of the screen.

Even though the entire game takes place on a single static screen, this is one of the purest action games you'll ever find.

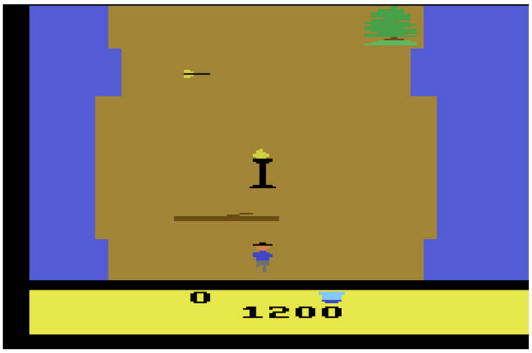


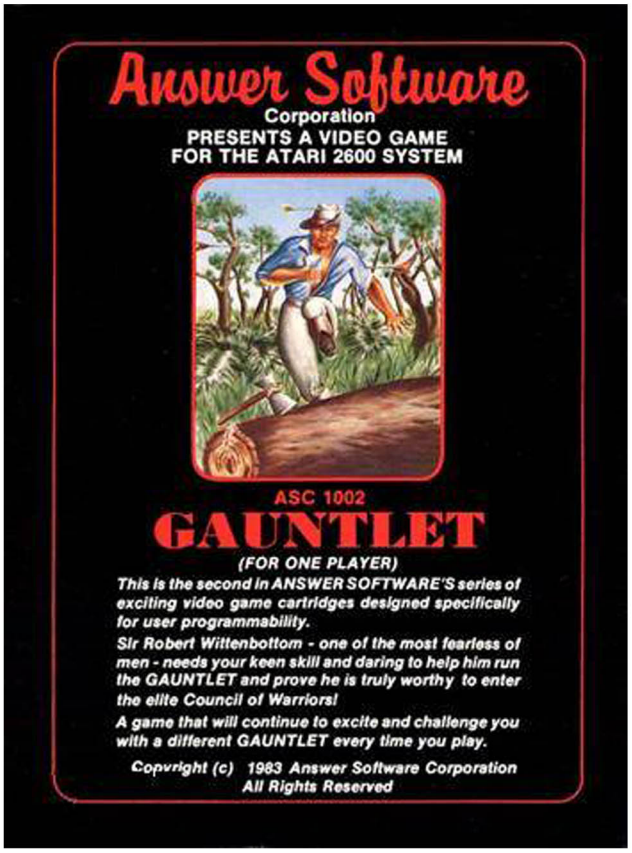
This has got to be one of the best setups for an Atari 2600 game. You are Sir Robert Wittenbottom, who after discovering an ancient civilization must run a dangerous gauntlet in order to prove himself worthy of becoming a warrior in their tribe. The only thing better than the setup is the thought of what the tribe would do to him if he fails.

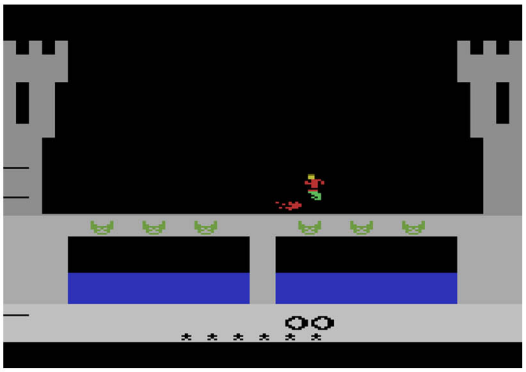
The gameplay is very high end for a 2600 game. There are not only numerous objects flying at your head (like arrows and tomahawks), there are also tons of things to leap over, old men who are in need of water, as well as fires on top of trees that must be extinguished. If that wasn't enough, you can also slide underneath certain objects.

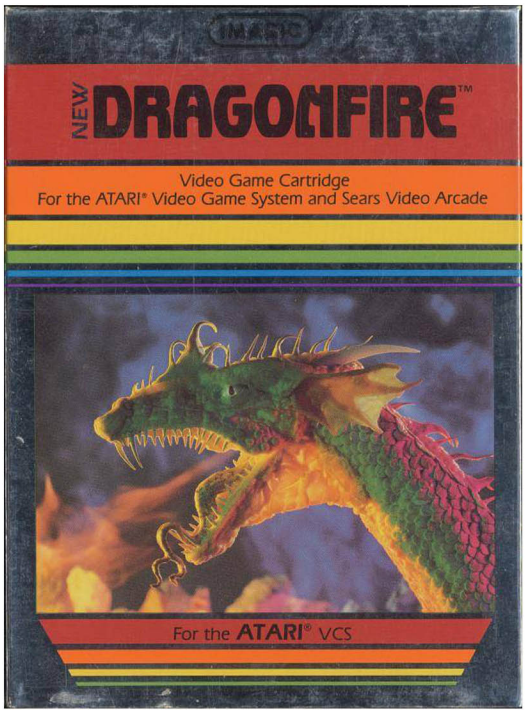
You not only have multiple hits per life, but you have a couple in reserve as well. This makes the game very accessible to all levels of gamer.

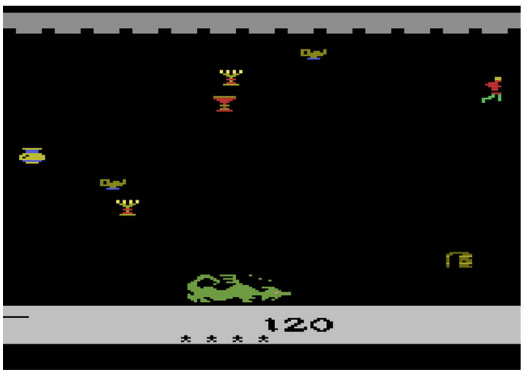
It's a shame that this game didn't get a wide release, because it could very easily have been a big hit rather than the ultra obscure gem that it is.











This is one of the most fast paced, fun, and deceptively difficult 2600 games to ever come out. It lures you in with the simple concept of raiding a dragons castle for treasure but before you know it you are going to be sitting on the edge of your seat as you make runs through fireball filled dungeons.

The game is broken up into two continually repeating screens. The first has you running across a bridge while dodging fireballs. You can duck under the high ones and jump over the low ones, however it is more difficult than it sounds since the fireballs not only come out randomly but also at different speeds. You can be setting up a jump over a slow moving fireball only to be greeted by a face level fireball that seems to have been shot out of a canon. Once you survive the trek across the bridge, then the real fun begins.

The second screen is the dragons lair that is filled with treasure as well as a fire breathing dragon roaming below. When you are ready you bolt out of the door and scramble around the room collecting treasure while dodging fireballs, and once you are in possession of all the treasure you are free to escape through the newly opened door. In the early going this is pretty easy as the dragon and the fireballs move very slowly. The story is quite different a few levels in as the dragons turn into sprinters and can shoot fireballs out so fast that the game resembles an early "bullet hell" shooter.

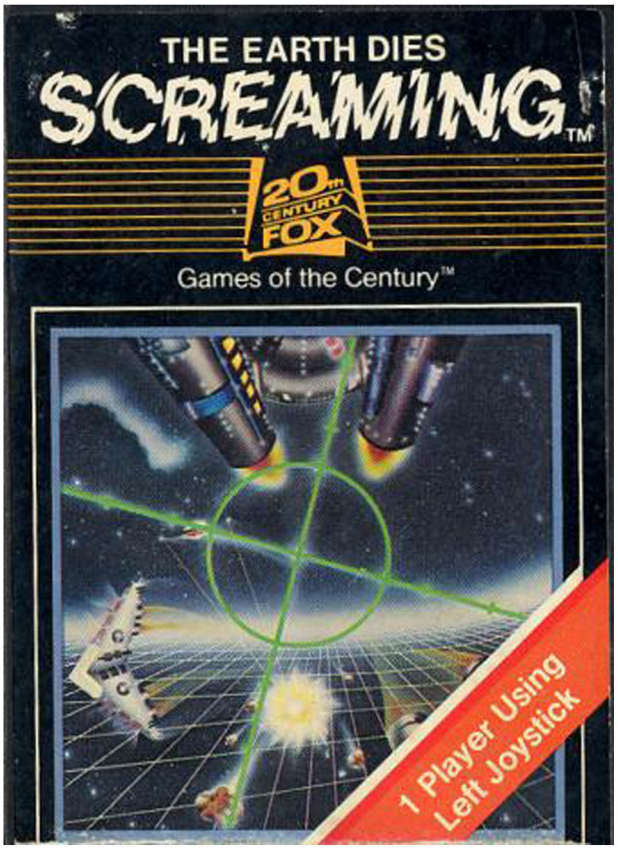
More often than not you are going to end up as charred remains on the dungeon floor, but once you get the hang of things you will be collecting treasure and dodging fireballs with ease. OK, maybe not with ease, but those panicked runs through the fireballs will last a little longer than they used to.

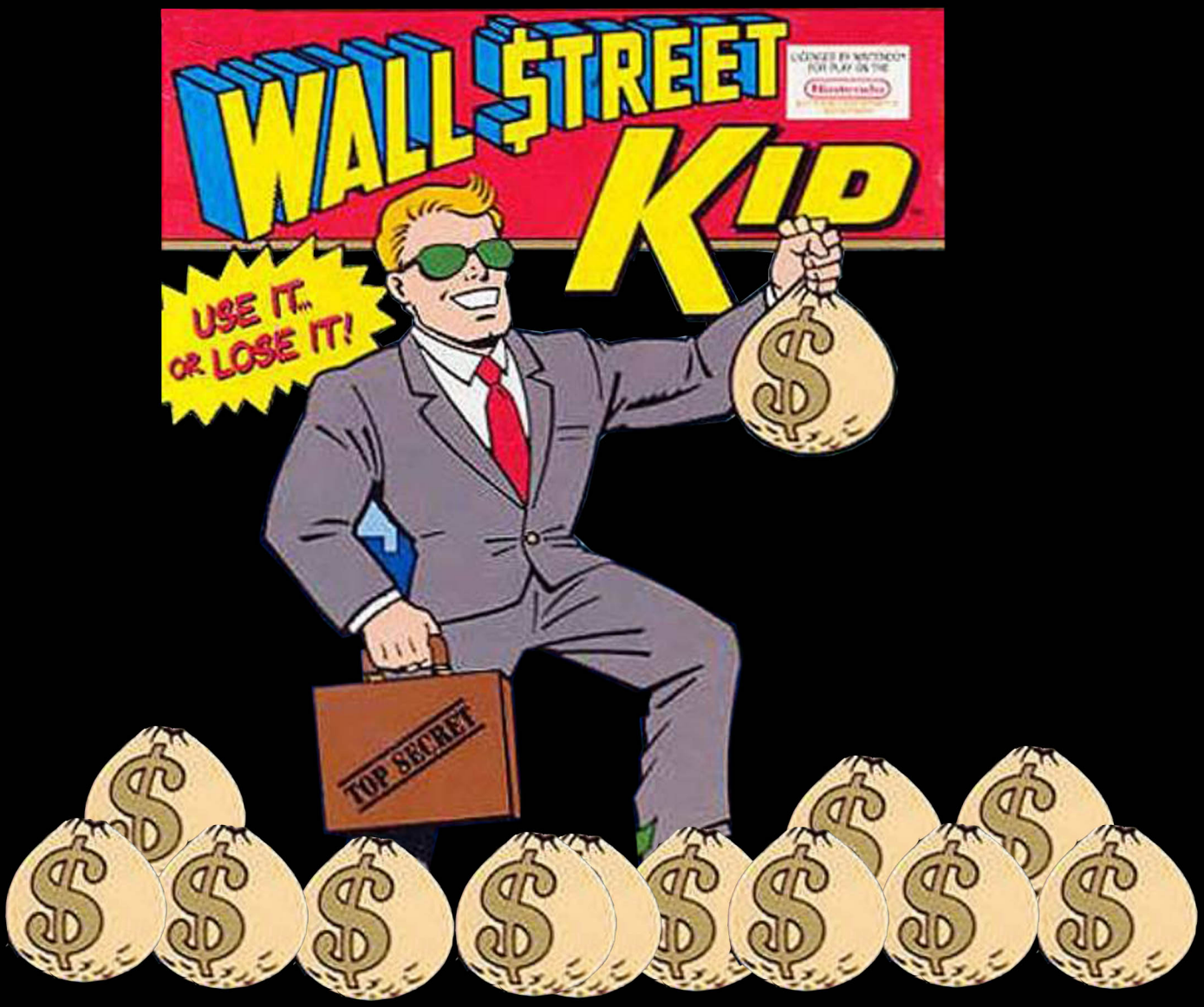
In what is simultaneously the coolest yet bleakest name for a game ever to be released for the 2600, The Earth Dies Screaming delivers on its promise of the Earth dying a screaming death.

You are in control of a lone ship that is flying at the very edge of Earth's atmosphere, which gives you a jump on the enemy alien ships that are raining down destruction upon the Earth. It remains a mystery why out of all the vast resources and manpower the Earth has to offer they could only muster up a single ship to defend the planet from alien invasion, but hey, it makes for some tense gameplay.

The game plays like a first person version of MIssile Command, as the alien ships will appear on the radar and slowly make their way to the earth. It's your job to wipe them out before they get below the horizon line, because if you don't they land a hit on the Earth. They also fire missiles at you, but it appears as though your ship is made from the strongest material known to man (adamantium?) because you can take a beating and keep on fighting. More often than not your game will end because the Earth was destroyed rather than your ship being destroyed.

This isn't a bad game, just a really short one. No matter how good you are the game is going to be over in a few minutes thanks to the odds being completely stacked against you.

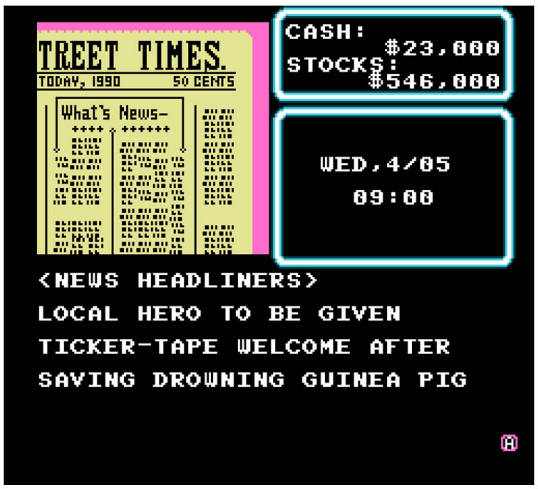




Wall Street Kid takes us back to a simpler time when the unbridled stock market greed only had the potential to bankrupt you rather than the entire world.

In a plot that is straight out of that Richard Pryor classic Brewesters Millions, you take the role of "The Kid". As The Kid you come to find out that your distant uncle Mr. Benedict has passed away, and since you are the last surviving relative you are in line to inherit his entire $600 Billion dollar fortune. Before that can happen though, you must prove yourself worthy of the inheritance. Unlike in Brewsters Millions however you aren't supposed to spend the money, rather you have to make money in the stock market. Not only that, but you must pamper your wife with expensive gifts, buy a giant million dollar mansion, a nice yacht, and of course buy back the family castle.

(Side Note: You may be asking yourself if the inheritance seems a bit high at $600 Billion. Well, you would be right. To put it in perspective, if you had that kind of money today you would be 12 times richer than Bill Gates, but in 1990 when the game was released you would be roughly 37 times richer than Mr. Yoshiaki Tsutsumi, who was the richest man for that year. Or to put it another way, if you had that money today you would be the 17th most valuable nation, right behind Turkey. So to put it mildly, they are a bit off on realistic numbers here.)



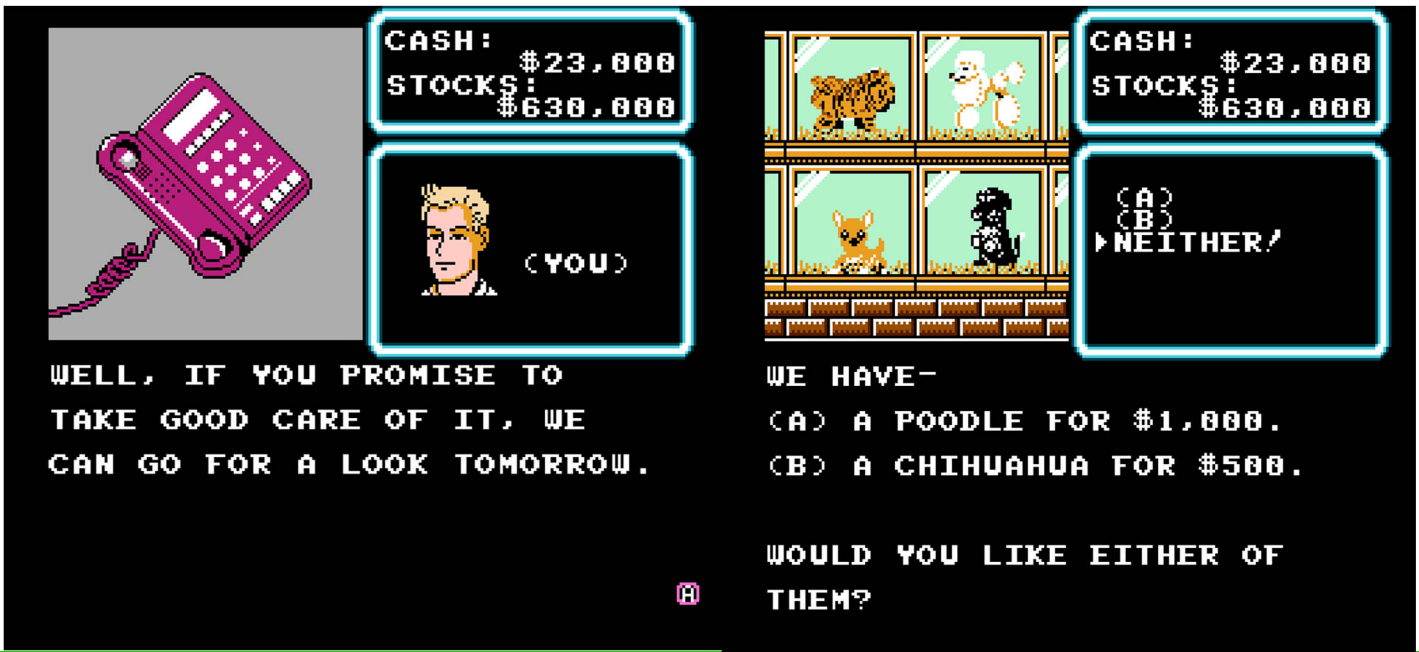
The game is broken up into four months, each with their own specific goal that must be met in order to continue (be it buying something or getting married). At the beginning of each day you will be greeted with the morning paper that gives you updates on what stocks are hot and what are not, as well as some amusing local news (like how robbers are flocking to the mall or how a local man is having a parade thrown in his honor because he saved a drowning guinea pig). After the morning read you typically will jump on your state of the art 1990 desktop computer and start buying and selling stocks before wasting the rest of the day by working out or spending time with your adorable fiance Priscilla.

Now I know that buying and selling stocks via a point and click menu system sounds like the cure for insomnia, but it is strangely addicting. When you see that the stock you own 20 shares of jumped 3 points overnight thereby making you tens of thousands of dollars you get a nice sense of satisfaction knowing that the hot stock tip you got from the paper paid off. Of course when the stock you threw all your money in bottoms out you'll find yourself muttering under your breath all the horrible things you'd like to do to the pencil pusher who thought that Strayhound bus lines was a good investment.

Just like in real life, you have to manage your time wisely. If you spend all day at your computer and ignore your fiance she'll eventually leave you (resulting in a game over). Thankfully at the start she is relatively low maintenance, requiring only a weekly picnic and the occasional $2,000 dog. Of course as time goes along she'll want more expensive things, like a $50,000 car, or a huge party to celebrate your engagement, and an expensive dress so that she'll look good at that party. Thankfully by the time she starts spending like she is auditioning for the next edition of The Real Housewives you should have a nice bank account built up. The other thing you have to watch out for is your health, which you can take care of by hitting the gym or taking a nice relaxing hike through the woods. Ignoring your health will result in you having a heart attack, thereby ending the game (and quite possibly your life).

The replay value is quite high with Wall Street Kid thanks to the completely random stock market. Of course the complete randomness of the stock market makes the game difficult in the early stages since you have to get incredibly lucky during the first month in order to double your initial $500,000 investment so that you can buy your first home. Often times it will take a few attempts before you make it through, but after that the game really opens up. Plus with a sadistic password system (seriously sadistic at 52 characters long) you can pick up after the first month and really be able to wheel and deal.

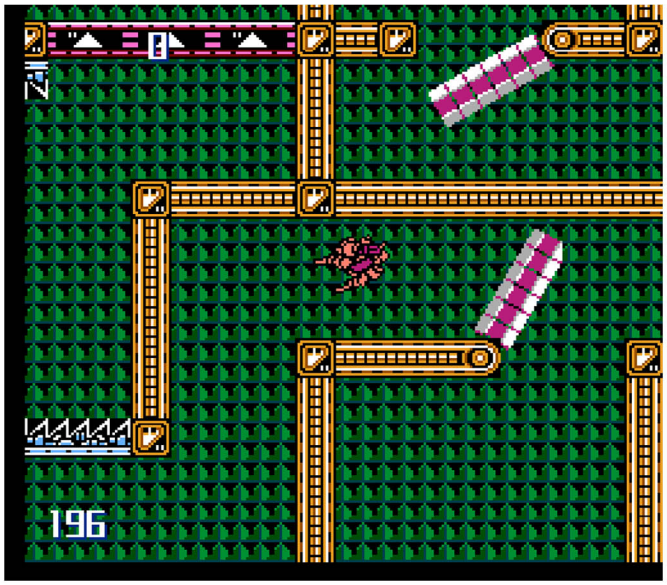
Whether you are looking for a unique gaming experience on the NES, or just want a cursory knowledge of what it would take to make the jump into the wild world of day trading, Wall Street Kid is worth a look.



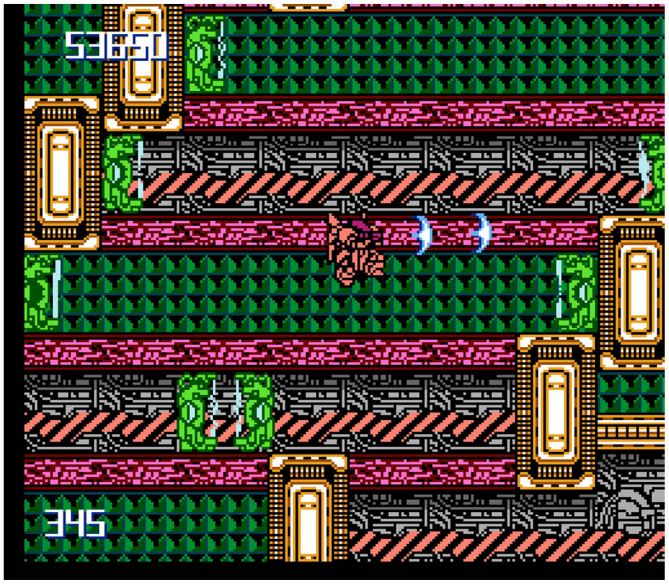
METALSTORM™

At first glance this looks like nothing more than your standard action game that just happens to feature giant robots. Of course looks can be deceiving, because this is one of the most innovative action titles to ever grace the NES.

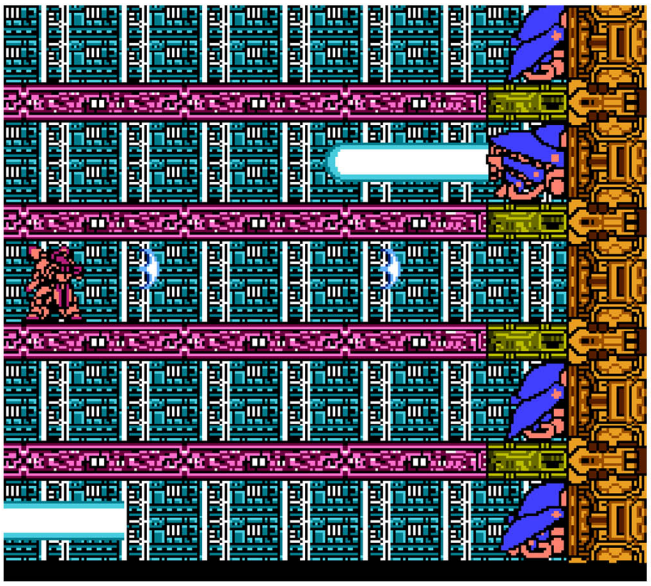
The story is pretty standard as far as action games go. Basically there is a giant laser on Pluto that has malfunctioned, and instead of protecting the solar system from alien invasion it is systematically blowing up the planets one by one. With time running out before Earth is targeted, the leaders of Earth do the smart thing and send every available weapon and ship to try and prevent a catastrophe. Oh wait, that would make things too easy. So instead of sending everything they have to prevent the Earth being turned into a pile of rubble, they send a single guy in a mech.

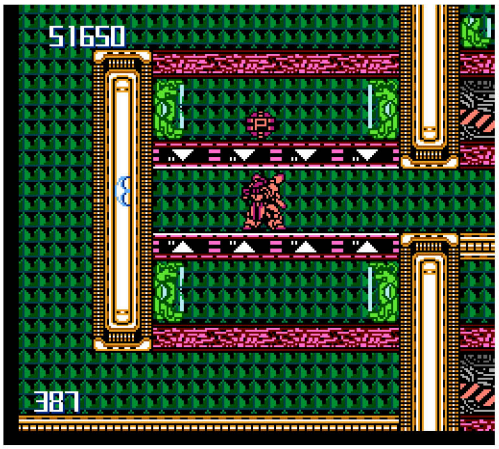


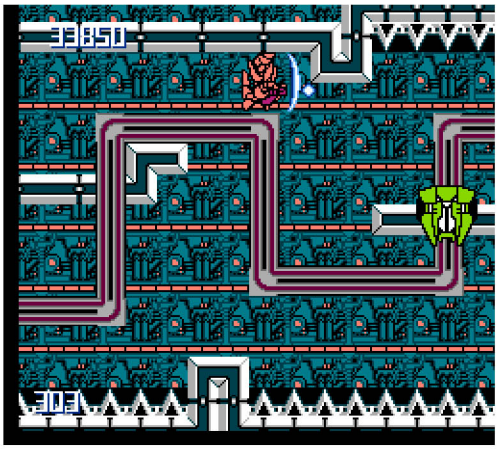
That mech is the M-308 Gunner, which is considered to be the most sophisticated weapon ever conceived by man. It has multiple firing options, optional shield upgrade, and the ability to reverse gravity at a moments notice. Despite the incredible amount of firepower that has been packed into this walking death machine, there is a slight design flaw.



Even though this is the most sophisticated weapon ever conceived by man, the mech explodes whenever it is touched. Seriously, the Ford Pinto could withstand a stronger hit that this mech. It would be one thing to blow up if you get shot in the face with a rocket, but it's another thing entirely to blow up from simply being touched by a robot half your size. The one hit deaths get old after a while, but thanks to a password system and unlimited continues it doesn't become a major issue.



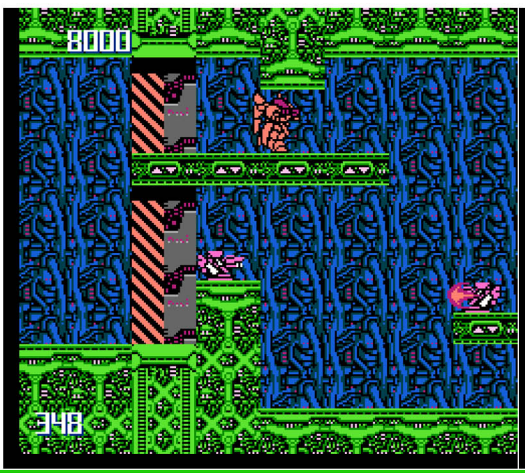


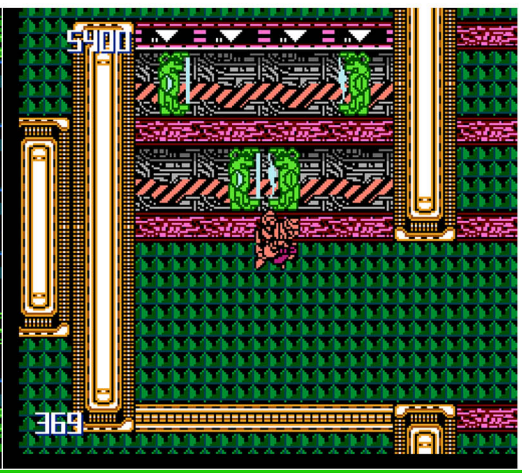


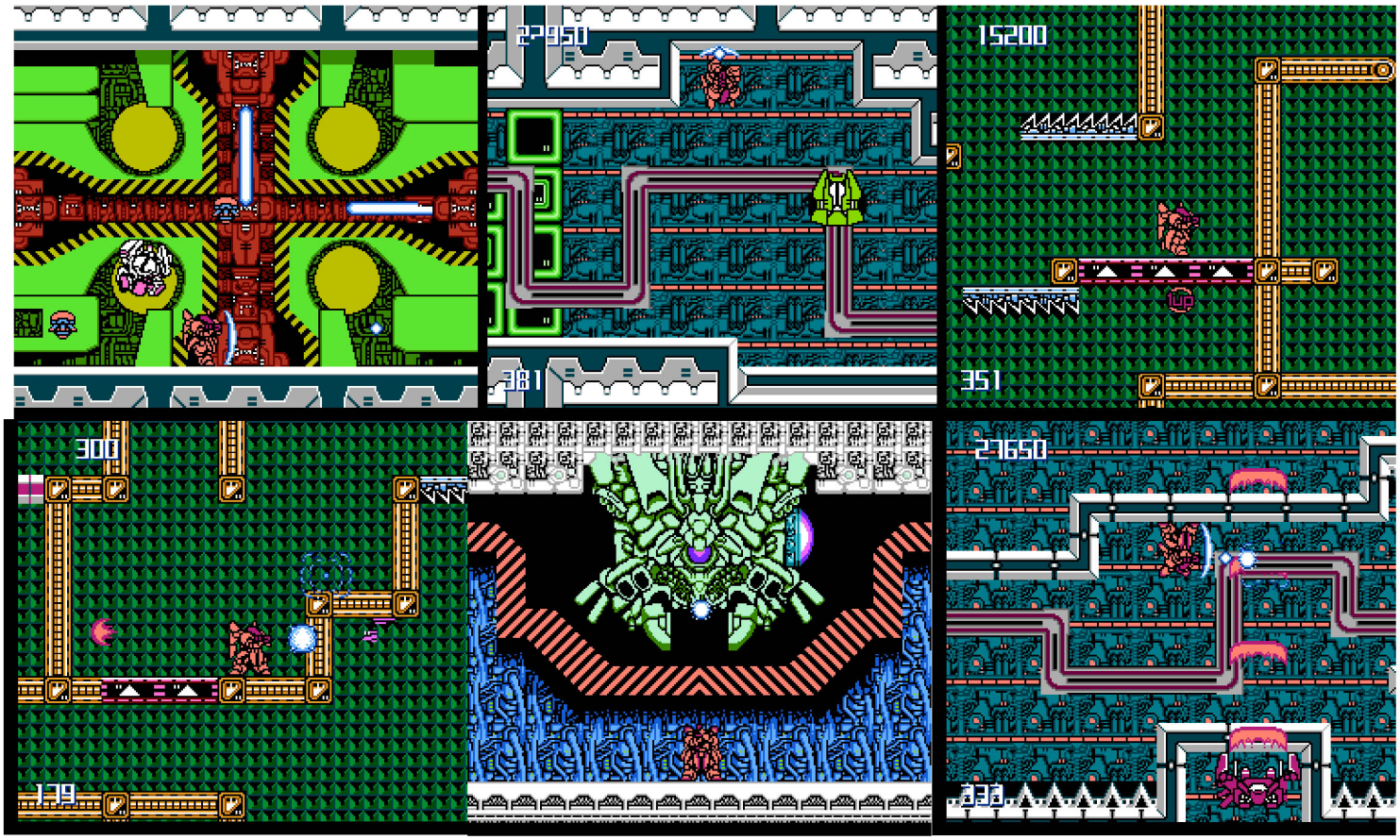
The levels do a good job of taking advantage of the biggest strength of the mech, the ability to reverse gravity. Unlike most games where reversing gravity would be little more than a gimmick, Metal Storm designs entire levels around the concept. In order to reach the end of some levels you have to constantly reverse gravity to find your way through or to reach a far off platform. Some of the level design is downright devious, but thankfully it's never challenging to the point of controller throwing. All told there are seven levels, each with two platforming stages and a big boss encounter.

Sadly the enemies as well as the bosses are pretty lackluster. The normal enemies range from small robots who shoot at you to medium sized robots who shoot at you to the occasional large robot that shoots at you. The bosses on the other hand are a mixed bag. Some of the bosses can be taken out in mere seconds, while others will wipe the floor with you. For example, the first boss requires you to make a gravity jump and to hold down the fire button, while the third boss requires an almost god like controller dexterity. Of course if you do get stuck at any of the bosses, there are passwords readily available on the internet to move you forward.

Uninspired enemies aside, the combination of innovative level design and furiously fast action gameplay make this one of the best examples of the genre on the NES.







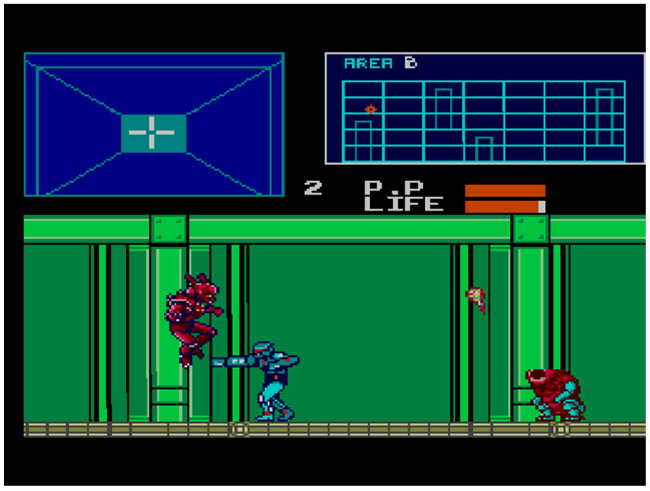
SPOILER ALERT!!!!!!!!

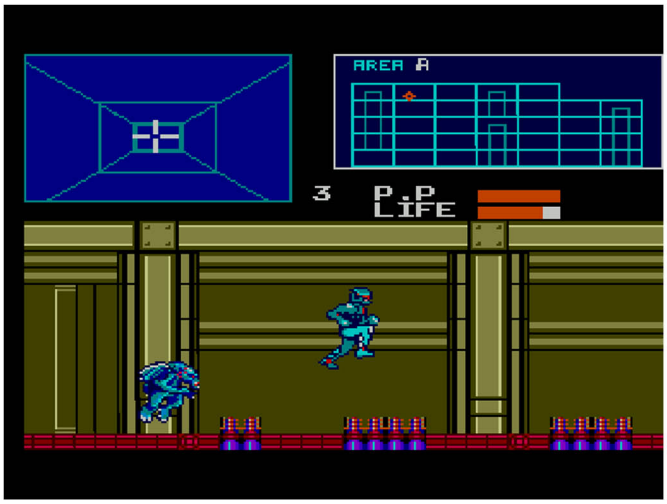
Normally I don't like to divulge the endings of games, but I must make an exception here. The typical prize that awaits heroes in action games usually range from being reunited with your girlfriend to getting a nice pat on the back from the President for saving the day. Here however our hero receives something much more valuable, immortality. Think about that for a moment. He gets immortality *after* going on a mission to save the Earth from destruction. Now I realize I'm not the brightest person in the world, but wouldn't you think that if you are sending off a lone hero to save the entire world from destruction, you might want to grant him immortality before the mission rather than after it? Kind of makes you wonder how the human race ever got to the point where they could build a giant death ray on Pluto, doesn't it?

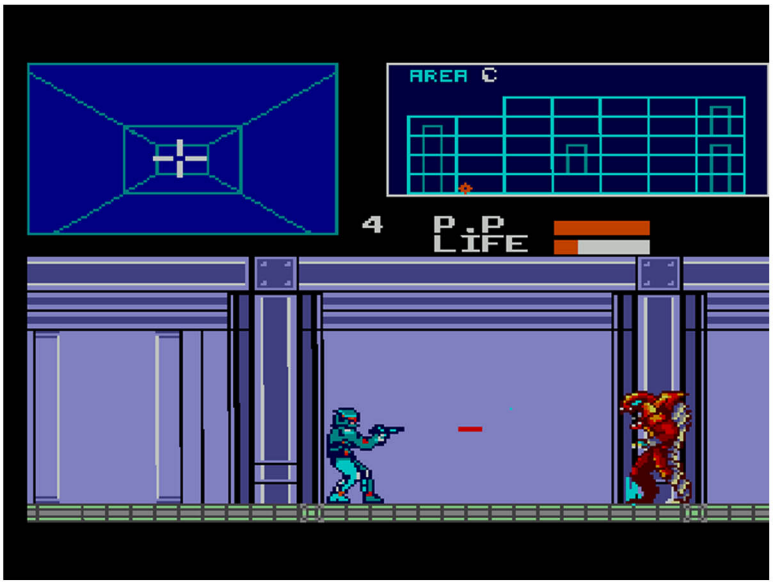
Cyborg Hunter is an above average side scrolling action game. Rather than go the route of traditional action games and be straightforward "get from point A to point B and kill everything in the middle", Cyborg Hunter has several zones filled with mazes and powerups, not unlike a stripped down Metroid.

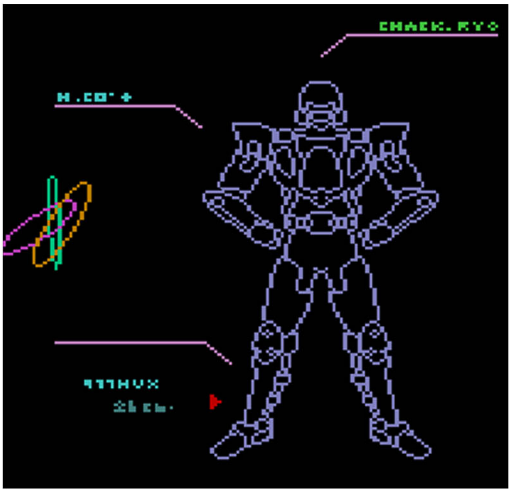
The story is pretty basic, you are the bounty hunter Paladin, who is sent on a mission to destroy the evil cyborgs who are bent on enslaving the universe. Their base is broken up into seven different areas, and in order to move on to the next one certain goals must be met.

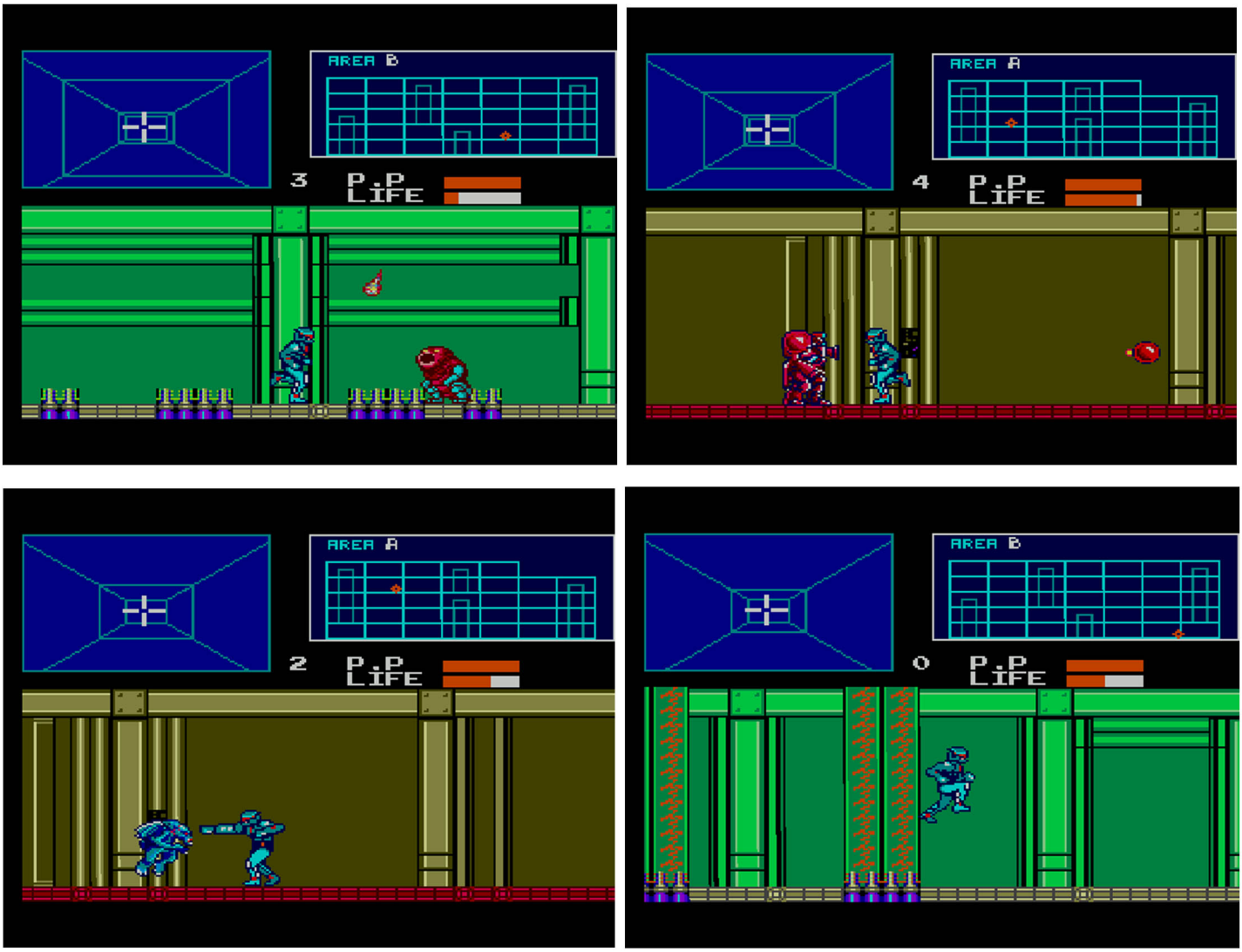
Early on it is just acquiring items like a shield or a jet pack, but in later areas you must defeat a boss in order to collect an ID card to allow passage. The upgrades are pretty standard fare and don't really move past different varieties of ray guns, which given how you start out the game with nothing more than a punch, is a nice upgrade. Of course this brings up the bigger point of why, if you are a bounty hunter, are you so completely ill-equipped to do battle. Seriously, how low rent of a bounty hunter do you have to be to show up to the fight to save the galaxy with nothing more than your fists and a serious hope that your enemies will provide weapons for you?







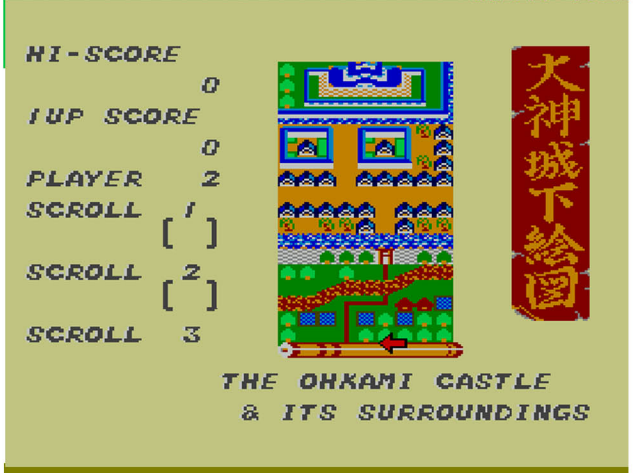




The gameplay is pretty standard, you run, you jump, you fight cyborgs. The top half of the screen however gives you a map to help you in your travels, and a 3-D motion tracker alerts you to enemies that are coming up ahead. There is a major design flaw however, in that in order to access your inventory screen you have to either have a second controller plugged in, or you have to switch controller ports in order to hit the button. This is fine if you are on an elevator, but when you are in the middle of a boss battle it isn't exactly convenient to unplug your controller just so you can switch weapons.

All in all, this is a very good Master System game and is very much worth a play through. The game is fairly short and with an ample amount of continues it can be played through in an afternoon.

You are in control of, well, a Ninja on a quest to rescue your princess girlfriend. Seriously, even 1630's Japan wasn't immune from the late 80's kidnapped girlfriend epidemic. Anyway, in order to rescue your beloved girlfriend, you must run through thirteen levels of ninja fueled chaos.

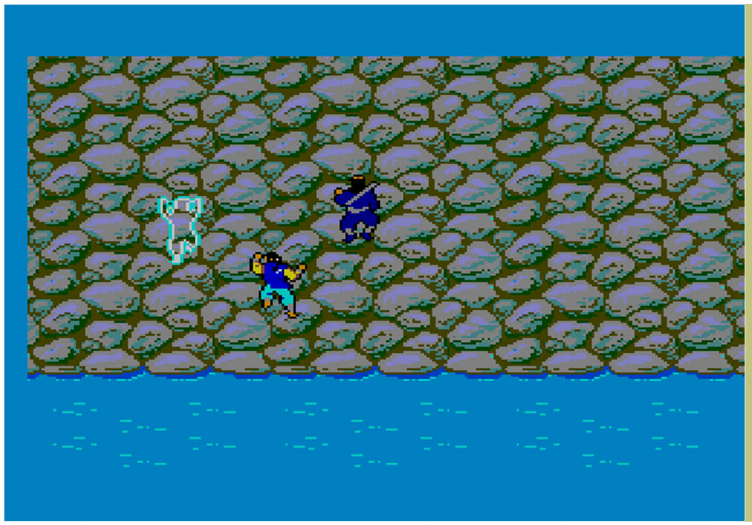


Now when I say ninja fueled chaos, I'm not kidding. There are ninjas with swords that will run full speed at you as well as ninjas with shurikens that, for some reason, will also run right at you at full speed (hey, I never said the enemy ninjas were smart). There are also a variety of hidden ninjas that will catch you off guard if you aren't paying attention. While you are running through the level chucking shurikens at the oncoming barrage of ninjas it's rather easy to run right by an innocent looking rock, of course if you do there's a good chance you are going to get a nasty surprise once the shuriken throwing ninja jumps out. The rock ninjas are the lucky ones however since some of their brethren apparently drew the short straw in the pre-battle meeting and are forced to hide in rabid dogs.

(Side Note: How does anybody think that hiding in a dog is a good idea? I can understand hiding in rocks or in trees since they can be hollowed out, but how do you hollow out a dog? Worse yet, how would you like to be the guy that has to explain to the ninja how he has to get inside the dog? I get the sense the guys that deliver that news have a very short life expectancy.)

Even though the odds are stacked against you, the playing field is leveled a bit thanks to an unlimited supply of throwing knives being at your disposal. Some enemies are even nice enough to drop scrolls that can do everything from making you run faster to giving you bigger and more powerful shurikens (it is good to see though that even in 1630's Japan bad guys still were courteous enough to always carry items that could help the invaders. Who knows, maybe that's where the long held video game tradition began). Unlimited ammo isn't the only thing you have in your arsenal, as you also have the ability to disappear in a cloud of smoke and reappear behind your enemies. Unfortunately the disappearing act only last for a few seconds, which means if you aren't quick enough you'll end up reappearing inside of an enemy, resulting in death.

The levels are pretty diverse for a game like this. In addition to the standard run up screen and kill everything in your path, there are also diagonal stages where you must dodge falling boulders while killing everything in your path. There is also a Frogger inspired level where you are on floating logs fighting ninjas, among others. These non-traditional levels add an extra layer of depth to the game and really do a great job of keeping the game fresh.



There are a couple of minor flaws with The Ninja. First off, the levels are really short. How short are they? Well, in the time it took you to read this sentence you could have been at the boss of level one. Which brings me to the next flaw, the bosses. Apparently you can't keep a bad guy down since the boss is essentially the same mask wearing guy level after level. While fighting the same boss over and over isn't the end of the world, a variety of bosses would have added a lot to the game. The only other thing that could be considered a flaw is the inclusion of one hit deaths. When the action gets fast and furious it is too easy to get clipped by something, which can be frustrating. However given the arcade style of the game I'm willing to overlook the one hit deaths and embrace the challenge (plus it helps that it doesn't cost me a quarter to continue, so when a game ends in three minutes I'm just a button press away from getting back in the fight).

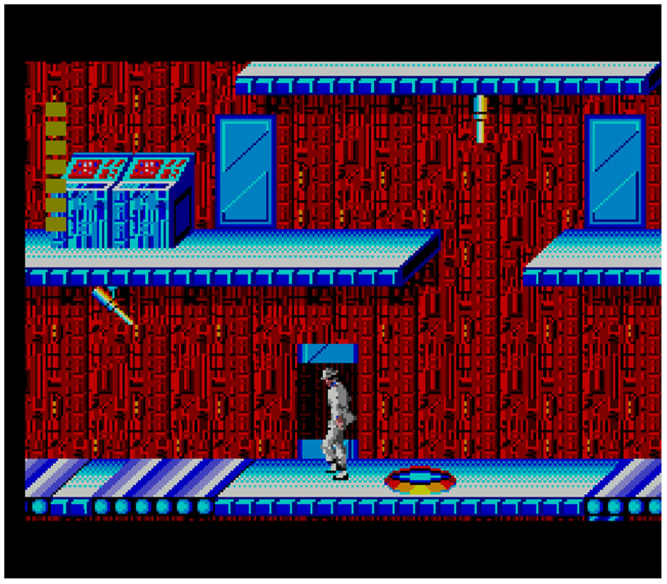
Minor flaws aside, The Ninja is a prime example of what an 80's action game was all about. It's a fast paced non-stop symphony of ninja fueled chaos that despite being nearly twenty-five years old still holds up today. If you are in need of a ninja fix, this is a good place to get it.

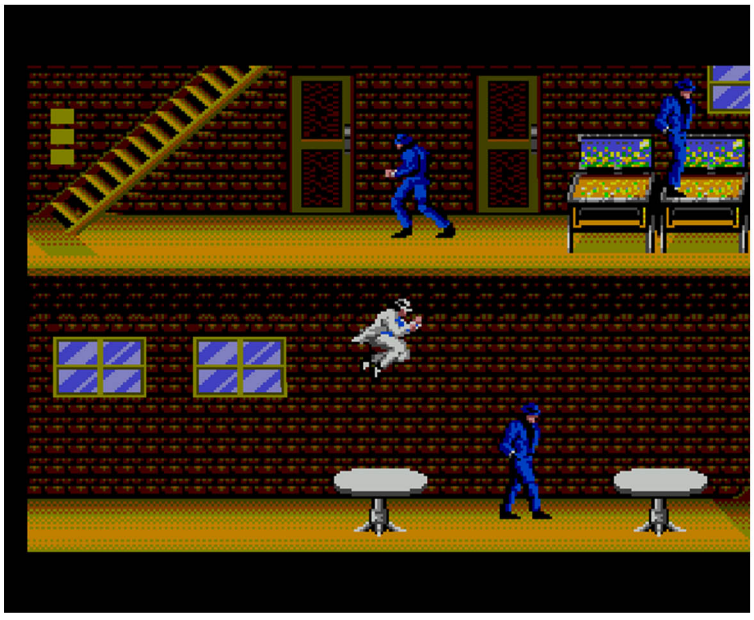
In what will forever be referred to as a much more innocent time, Moonwalker features Michael Jackson is in his Smooth Criminal Outfit going from building to building searching through closets for lost kids.

MICHAEL JACKSON'S MOONWALKER

As Michael you get to high kick and moonwalk through five different locales, ranging from night clubs to graveyards. There are plenty of gangsters to take out on your way to saving all the kids, and surprisingly enough, it is actually pretty fun to do so.

The gameplay is simple but solid. In both versions it is very easy to control Michael and to pull off the necessary moves to fight off the throng of gangsters that come at you. While the locations of the levels may change, it is essentially the same all the way through the game. You enter a level, search through several floors for the kids, fight a boss, lather/rinse/repeat. While this may sound like a negative it really isn't, since the focus is put on the search and rescue of the kids rather than the level design



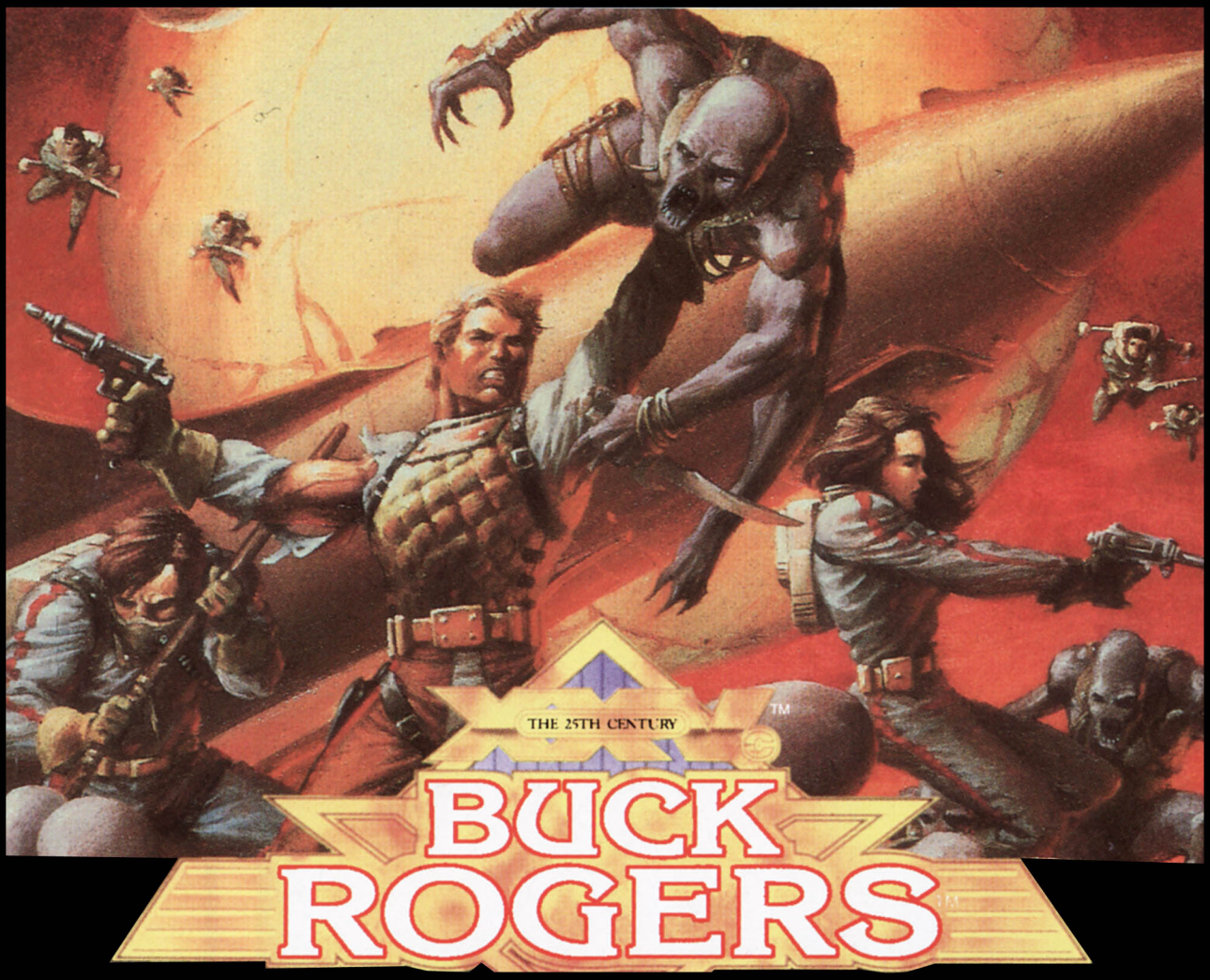


There is one extremely disturbing trend in this game however, and it has to do with the constant focus on the crotch. Seriously, everything is centered around crotches. When Michael kick, the kicks are to the crotch. When he punches, he punches to the crotch. When he throws his had Oddjob style, it is at crotch level. And hands down the most disturbing incident is every single time he opens a door he spins around and gives a crotch thrust, which is made even more disturbing when you consider that kids are occasionally sitting in the closet door he just opened. Which means years from now when they are thinking back to their time as a kidnap victim they are going to have major breakdowns thanks to the PTSD flashbacks of Michael Jackson's crotch liberating them from bondage.

Once you get past the mental image of Michael Jackson repeatedly thrusting his crotch you'll find that pretty much everything that is in the 16-Bit version is present in the 8-Bit version, which is a rarity. Aside from the obvious graphical differences, the Genesis version does offer ranged attacks in the form of fairy dust (wish I was making that up), as well as some different common enemies. The biggest change however is to the end of level boss battles. Master System version separates the boss battles from the stage making them stand alone encounters, whereas in the Genesis version upon finding all the kidnapped kids your pet monkey Bubbles descends from the heavens above to direct you to the proper area of the stage where the boss battle is to occur.

(Side Note: Can anybody else out there envision Michael Jackson sitting in on the negotiations for this game and refusing to sign on the dotted line unless Bubbles could make an appearance? Anybody else out there think it's strange that I knew his monkey's name off the top of my head? Wow, I really feel like drinking after that revelation).

It's really a toss up as to which version you should play as they are both solid ports of the game. If you want to witness the true power of the Master System, go with that version. If you want to see Michael throw out fairy dust with every punch and kick, go with the Genesis version. If you want to see terrified children weep as Michael thrusts his crotch at their heads, then you can't lose no matter which version you pick.



Buck Rogers takes the tried and true Dungeons and Dragons rule set and applies it to this futuristic setting. The end result is arguably the best Strategy-RPG game on the Genesis, and perhaps the entire 16-Bit generation.

You create a six member team by choosing between four classes: Warrior, Healer, Thief, and Robot Jock. From there you can expand their abilities by making them proficient in everything from demolitions to lock picking to fast talking (which allows you to talk your way out of a situation rather than blast your way). There are eight skills that can be learned by everybody in addition to their class specific skills, which gives you the ability to create your own unique team depending on your play style. If you are a pacifist you can invest heavily in the aforementioned fast talk ability and try to bluff your way past security. Although if you prefer the more destructive approach you can put all of your stock into things like demolitions and zero G combat training so that you can quickly flank your enemies and reduce them to smoldering piles of rubble. Once you have that team you are set out into the universe to save the Earth from RAM, who are building a Doomsday Laser that will obliterate the entire world.

The battles are straight up classic strategy gameplay. Once a battle begins your party can find itself facing off against enemies from across a room or be completely surrounded by enemy forces.

Of course team battles aren't the only ones to be found here, there are also intense ship to ship battles. As you fly around the galaxy in search of your next destination you will occasionally be confronted by RAM ships, which can range in size from the mega sized war ships all the way down to the Mini-Me sized scout ships. Regardless of the enemy, the battles play out in a turn based cat and mouse mode. Basically if your ship captain is well trained he'll be able to out maneuver the enemy pilot and set you up perfects to rain down a vast array of missiles and lasers upon the RAM ship. Sure you can take the easy way out and blast their hull until it collapses and turns their ship into space debris, or you can have some real fun by taking out their engines and boarding the ship pirate style. Once onboard the battles revert back to the squad based fights, but you have the chance to loot their ship and even take over the entire thing and sell it for scrap back at the base. Not only do you get more experience by choosing this path, but you also get the satisfaction of being a no good space pirate.

The story is non-linear and very deep, requiring you to visit multiple places around the galaxy and to explore every nook and cranny of enemy bases in order to figure out your next move. The missions are also varied which keeps the game from getting stale. One minute you are going to be joining forces with aliens on Mars in order to defend their village from invading RAM forces, and the next minute you are going to be sneaking into a RAM base in order to gather intel. The game comes with a 100 plus page guide to help you get on the right path should you become stuck, but it isn't necessary to really enjoy the game.

If you are a D&D fan, a Sci-Fi fan, or a strategy game fan, you owe it to yourself to play through Buck Rogers.

This port of the arcade Beat 'Em Up is just plain wrong on so many levels. Not just wrong, but so wrong that it would offend the overwhelming majority of people in this country.

Offensive like "I can't believe someone put this into a video game" wrong. So wrong that if this game were made today there would be nonstop coverage on the major "news" networks featuring interviews with everyone from Jesse Jackson to Jack Thompson calling for this game to be banned while simultaneously demanding that the heads of the designers be placed on pikes and put outside Gamestop stores as a warning to other video game designers.

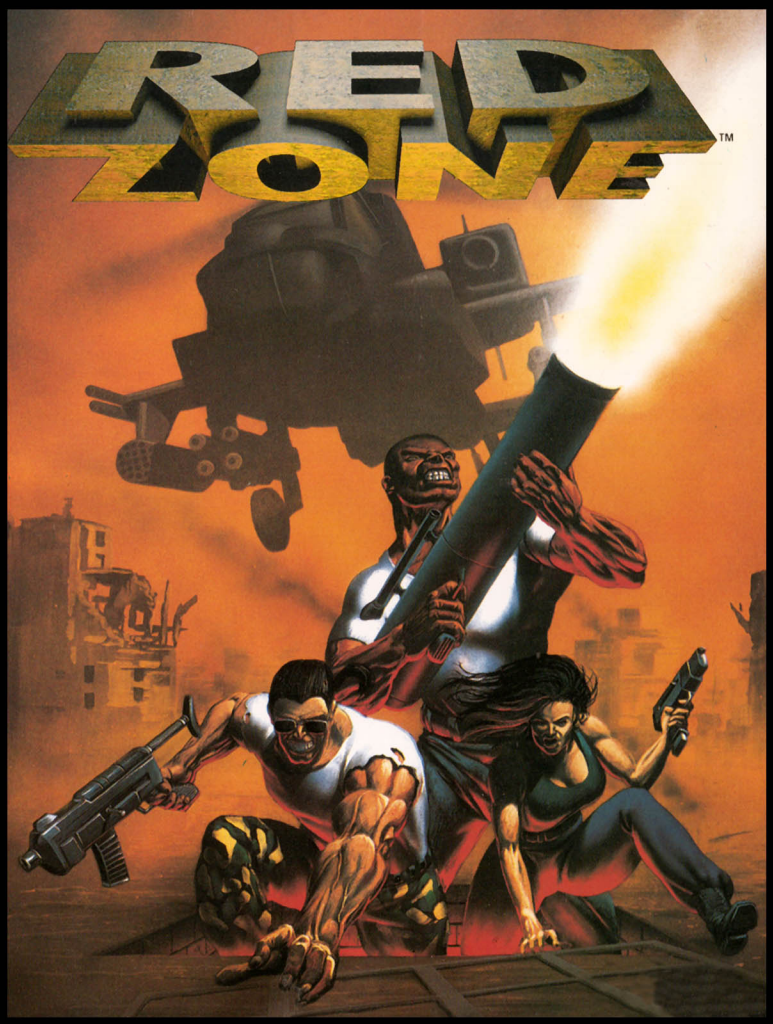
Admit it, after that build up you want to play the game, don't you? If you do you are going to be sadly disappointed in what you find. Oh don't worry, I didn't oversell the fact that the game is incredibly offensive (in fact I probably undersold it), I did however fail to mention the single most offensive thing, the concept and the gameplay. It's one thing to be racially insensitive in a video game, it's another thing entirely to make a game that is so maddeningly difficult that the majority of the players will never see the halfway point in the game, let alone the ending.

The story basically boils down to "oh look they kidnapped my girlfriend so now I must go on a killing rampage in order to get her back", which means if you played a game anytime after 1985 you already know the story. The wrinkle this time around is that you and your enemies are all on roller skates. Yes, roller skates. I don't know about you but when I plan on getting into a street fight the first thing I do is run and grab my skates. Seriously, at best you might be able to land a nice kick to the knee before losing your balance, and at worst you are going to end up face planting because a tiny pebble got stuck in your wheel.

Now I realize that most Beat 'Em Ups of the era were difficult, but none of those can approach the difficulty found here. The first thing you'll notice is that your life bar is pretty short. Normally this isn't a big deal because you have a few lives in reserve, except here you only have a single life. Again, that's not that big of a deal since there are always continues available to you. Wait, did I say always? I mean almost always since there are no continues to be found here. That said at the end of every level you do have the opportunity to do a little shopping, and one of the items you can purchase is an extra life. Of course it's the most expensive item and prevents you from being able to buy other items you are going to need in order to survive, like faster skates and a stronger attack. Without those items you'll end up getting your skates handed to you on a platter, of course with those items you don't have any room for error. I suppose this adds to the replay value, assuming of course that you are a masochist.

Now for the moment you've all been waiting for, the really offensive stuff. While there is nothing outrageous about the average enemies, the bosses stand alone in video game history as being offensive, and in some cases down right racist. Take the first boss (called Big Momma), who is a kung-fu fighting, pancake throwing Aunt Jemima lookalike. And after you defeat her you get a single cartoon panel of a flexing white kid standing over the unconscious body of an African-American caricature, which is something that hasn't been seen regularly in this country since the days of Jim Crow. And being an equal opportunity offender, the second boss is a speedo and bow-tie wearing gay breakdancer. Read that last sentence again and take a long hard look at the image and let that sink in (and yes I realize that I used the phrase "long hard". It's rare I can work in such a blatantly double entendre into these reviews that I felt like I needed to take advantage of it). And if those first two bosses aren't horrifying enough, the third level boss is a pair of killer clowns, which I won't show here for various reasons (one reason being that clowns freak me the heck out and I don't really want to give them any more press than they already get, and the second is that despite my mad classic gaming skills I just wasn't quite good enough to make it to the end of the third level in order to capture a screen shot. See, told you the game was tough).

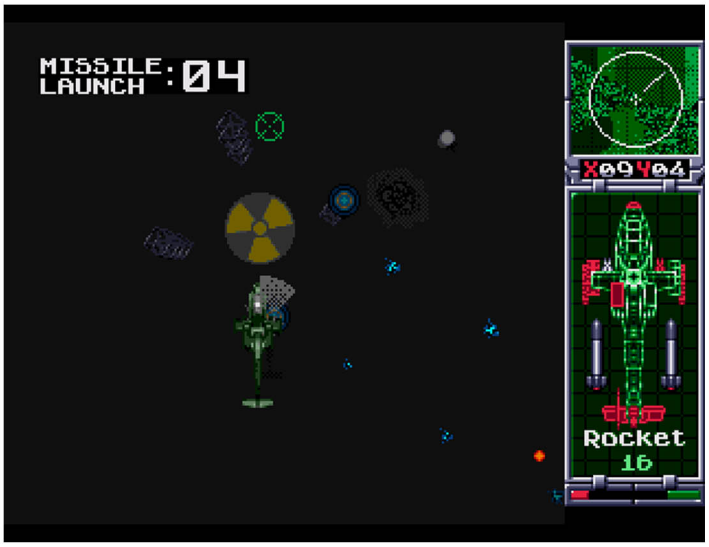
If you aren't easily offended and enjoy hardcore Beat 'Em Ups, DJ Boy isn't a bad way to go. If you are easily offended, stay as far away from this one as you can get.



This is a perfect example of how a great idea can be ruined by a totally unforgiving difficulty level. Your mission to infiltrate an island dictatorship in order to prevent the crazed leader from using nukes to reduce the worlds cities to a pile of smoldering radioactive rubble just might set a video game record for just how quickly you throw your controller down in frustration.

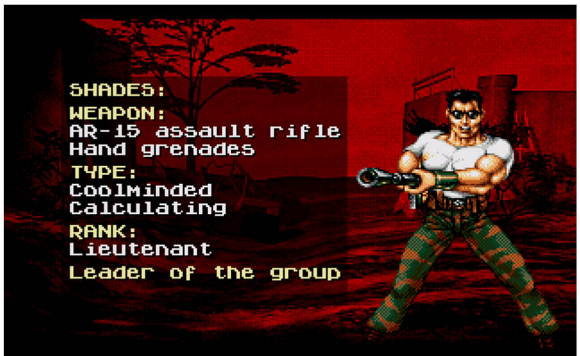
In order to achieve your objective you must use your heavily armed attack chopper and the trio of hardened soldiers to complete ten missions. These missions have you taking a systematic approach to infiltrating and taking down this heavily guarded island base. The action alternates between helicopter missions and infiltration missions on foot, or at least it would if the game wasn't impossible.

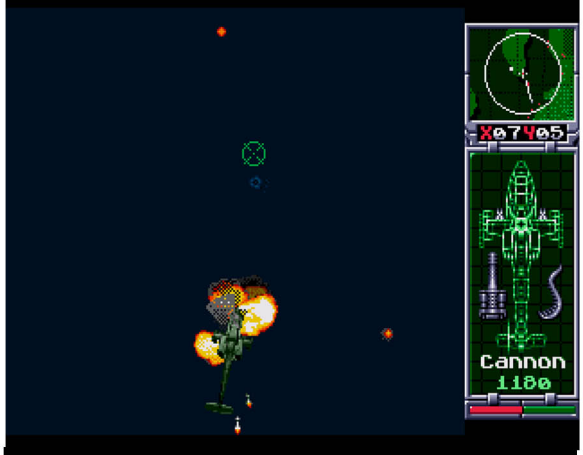
Take the first couple of missions. Completing the first mission is incredibly easy, requiring you to fly inland while avoiding a couple of anti-aircraft guns and land land in a remote area to pick up a disc. Even if you take the scenic route it will, at most, take you 60 seconds to complete. The second mission is where the game takes off the training wheels, puts you on a rocket bike, lights the fuse and aims you directly at the Grand Canyon with little more than a pat on the back and a "good luck" muttered under its breath. Seriously, I can't think of another game that ramps up the difficulty so quickly. Anyway, the second mission requires you to fly to one end of the island and blow up a power plant, then follow the power lines to the other end of the island to take out a radar tower. Sounds simple enough right? Well, you only have 60 seconds to achieve this. Now this wouldn't be that big of a deal if the game took a standard "run and gun" style approach, unfortunately the designers decided that realism was the way to go. As a result if your helicopter takes any fire whatsoever, or even so much as bumps into anything you not only lose the use of your weapons, but you also lose control of your chopper. Sure you can fly back out to sea and land for repairs, but thanks to the 60 second time limit all you'll be able to do is sit back and watch the nukes fly into the night sky.

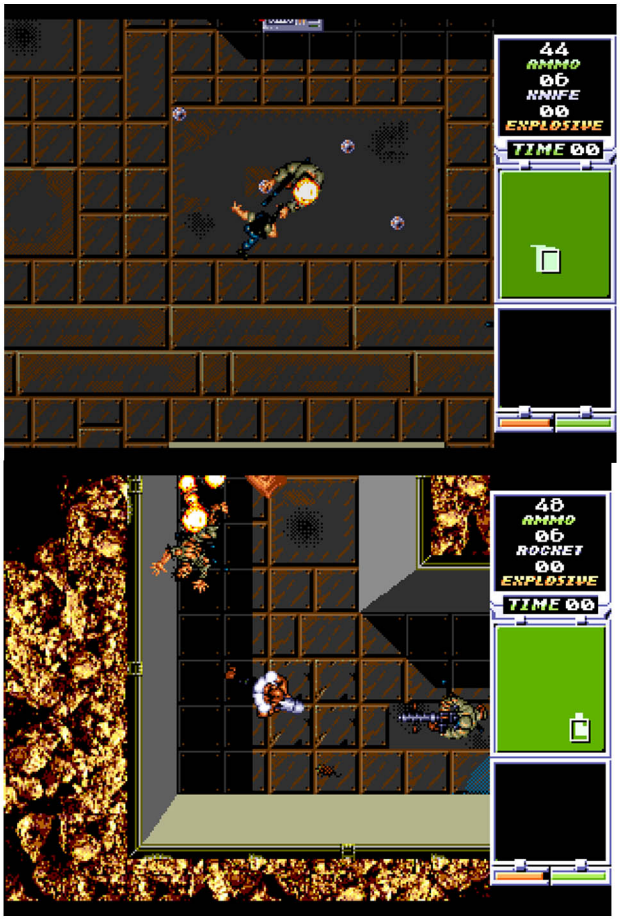


Even though your Apache helicopter is as fragile as a paper mache helicopter, it does pack a serious punch. In addition to the standard machine gun, it also has air to ground rockets, air to air homing Stinger missiles, as well as air to ground homing Hellfire missiles. So for the short time you are airborne you can lay to waste to a lot of enemy infrastructure and hardware. If you happen to be a classic video game god and can somehow make it past the second stage, you just might get to experience the top down action stages. Basically you get to pick between three soldiers, each of which has their very own special weapon. Shades comes equipped with hand grenades, Rocco runs into battle with a rocket launcher, and Mirage has knives. Putting aside the gender bias for a second (seriously, the men get high explosives and the woman get a knife? Kinda surprised they didn't give her a chefs hat, give her a nice open palmed smack on the rear while telling her to get in the kitchen) if you do get to these levels you are going to be greeted with some of the slowest gameplay and stupidest enemies ever to grace a video game screen.

(Side Note: Seriously, how inept are video game military leaders? Would you under any circumstances put the fate of the world into the hands of a person that calls himself Shades? What about Mirage? Rocco? OK, maybe Rocco, but definitely not the first two. Also, why is it in every game like this there always has to be an ethnic and gender diversified team? I mean Rocco looks like he could take on the world with that giant rocket launcher, but Shades looks like a roadie for a mid 80's metal band, and Mirage, well, I really don't know much outside of the fact that I'm pretty sure that pose and outfit aren't military approved.)







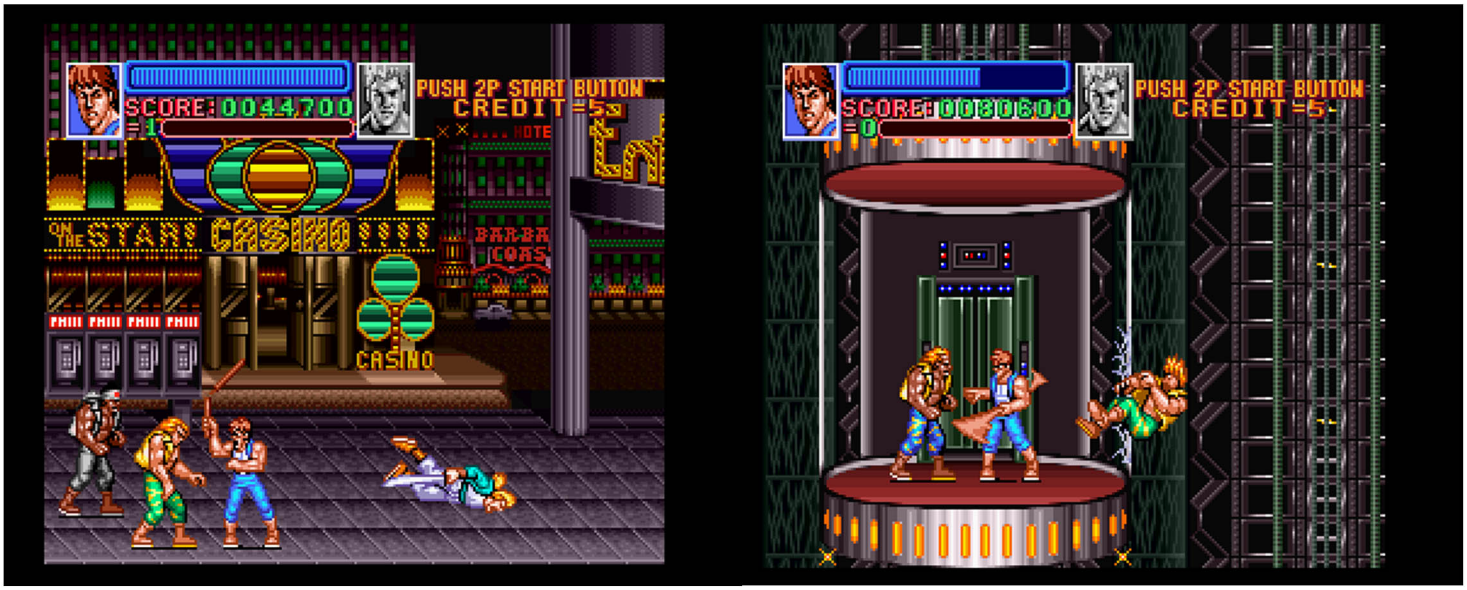
How slow is it? Well in the time it took to write the previous paragraph you could have moved your character about six steps. It is a bit of a shock to go from the frantic pace of the helicopter segments to the slow as molasses action segments. The upside is that the action moves so slowly that you get to experience the stupidest AI in history. Take the first enemy you come across, who has set up his machine gun just around a corner so he can ambush you. There are a variety of ways you can take him out, such as running across his line of fire while tossing a grenade, or you can go all wild west on him by jumping out from behind the corner and doing your best quick draw imitation. Of course you could also just push the radioactive barrel around the corner and then right up to him, then casually walk back around the corner and wait for him to unload enough bullets into it to make it explode, killing himself in the process. Sadly the rest of the AI isn't too bright either, often just standing around and waiting for you to kill them. Of course due to the difficulty level of the helicopter portions of the game the only way you'll ever get to see just how slow and stupid the enemies are you'll have to youtube it.

It really is a shame that 98% of gamers will never see past the second level because this had the makings of a classic Genesis game. As it stands though it is little more than a monument to frustration.

In this Super Nintendo exclusive sequel to the classic arcade game, you control Billy or Jimmy Lee as they fight their way through wave after wave of generic hoodlums on a quest to rescue Marian from the clutches of the evil Shadow Warriors. Wait, wasn't that the plot of virtually every Double Dragon game? Regardless, the recycled plot is the least of this games worries.

The original Double Dragon was a thing of beauty. It featured two kung fu fighting brothers who set out to stain the concrete with the blood of countless street thugs by using a variety of quick and brutal moves like the elbow thrust and the knee grinder (or whatever the move where you continually bashed the face of the enemy with your knee was called). It also had memorable enemies like those wild whip wielding women, the fat guy with the machine gun final boss, and of course the giant musclebound Abobos that could not only punch you into oblivion but could pick you up and toss you halfway across the screen while letting out a menacing "aaarrrrgggg". Even though there was a great foundation in place the designers of this sequel found a way to screw it all up, mainly by getting rid of all the good parts of the original (and yes this includes the unforgivable sin of leaving out the Abobos).

The biggest problem with this game is that the generic enemies are just plain merciless. Instead of following in the hallowed tradition of every martial arts movie ever made, the enemies attack you all at once rather than patiently waiting their turn to be pummeled. Not only that but they always have the ability to surround you, which when combined with the fact you get stunned after two measly punches means that for the bulk of the game you are little more than a practice dummy. Now I know what you are thinking, and yes you are a kung fu master who should be able to put up a pretty good fight. That said you move so slow it is almost like you are punching and kicking through a giant vat of jello. Thankfully there are a decent amount of weapons you can pick up, but even they have their problems.



The standard weapons like the knife and the grenade work exactly how you would expect them to with no problems whatsoever. Of course then you have weapons like the boomerang, which besides being quite possibly the most inefficient street fighting weapon in the history of the world also has one of the biggest drawbacks to a weapon imaginable, it flies right back at you. Now this wouldn't be a big deal if you could, you know, catch it, but apparently a kung fu master lacks the ability to catch with anything other than his face. And speaking of being a kung fu master, one would assume that they would know how to use a staff as a weapon. Not these guys however. Instead of having six feet of devastating reach, the "kung fu master" chokes up on the staff to the point where it gives him an extra six inches of reach. The end result has the "kung fu master" swinging the tip of the staff so rapidly that he looks like a crazed nun with a ruler rather than someone who looks like they can take on a vicious street gang. The only valuable weapon in the game are the nunchucks, which have great reach as well as speed. Of course every time you move on to a new section of the stage they mysteriously disappear.

(Side Note: Why is it in every game like this when you get your hands on a special weapon you are forced to drop it when you move on to a new part of the level? The only theory I can come up with is that the doorways in these games aren't doorways, rather they are portals that are straight out of the Terminator series. This would explain why you can't carry weapons across them since the only things that can travel through them is human tissue. Of course for that to work the characters would either have to be nude (which thankfully they aren't), or their clothes are painted on, which if that's the case adds a whole other disturbing layer to this theory.)

There are seven missions for you to fight your way through. Unlike the original where you fought your way though the streets to the enemy hideout, here you begin in Las Vegas and fight your way all the way to San Francisco. This includes a fight at the Las Vegas airport that culminates in a boss battle to determine who has to sit through the in flight movie, Double Dragon (while this may not be true, it would be a fitting punishment for losing a fight). Of course you'll never find out if this is true or not, since apparently thanks to a combination of budget cuts and a rushed production schedule all of the cut scenes that contained the "plot" were cut from the final product. Which is sad because with the added cut scenes and plot points, this game would...well...still be pretty bad.

There are a few good things here, like the rather nice looking graphics and the ability to take on the street gang with a buddy. Of course thanks to there being a severely limited number of shared credits and the fact that the difficulty level is permanently set on "Pain", fighting the good fight with a buddy is going to be short lived. The best thing about the game however is that by the time you and your buddy have blown through your credits you'll be nostalgic for the good old days and have an unwavering desire to play through the vastly superior original Double Dragon.

At first glance this may look like nothing more than your garden variety anime infused Action Platforming title, however once you hit start you'll find that this is one of the deepest games of the era.

"YOU KNOW, ABOUT THAT BEAUTIFUL GIRL."

Even though the first level is relatively short, you'll still get a good idea of what the game has in store for you. The level is broken up into two different segments, an isometric pseudo top down section and a side scrolling action segment. The first segment is a completely open world so you can run anywhere you like, continually fight spawning enemies to gather more gold, and even do a little bit of shopping. However once you make it to a certain screen a story element pops up that forces you to find the correct building, thereby starting the side scrolling portion of the level.

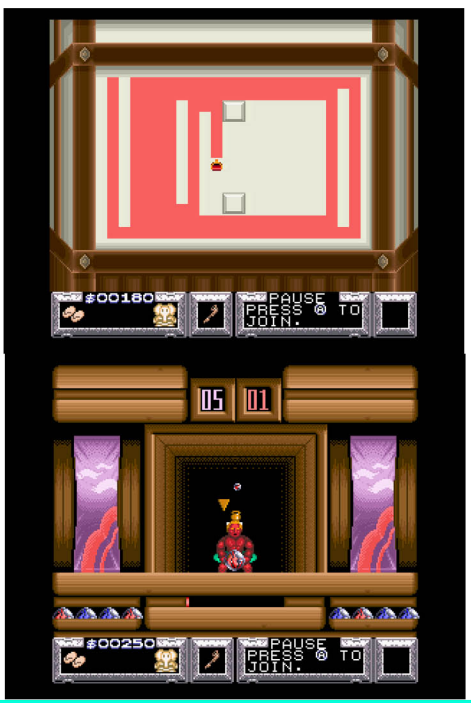
It's here where the game becomes very straightforward. Basically you go from point A to point B while killing everything in your path until you make it to a boss. The levels are laid out nicely and there are a wide variety of enemies to take on, including everything from zombies to flame monsters to giant killer umbrellas. The bosses are equally inventive, ranging from a giant ghost who can only be hurt when you knock her projectiles back at her to a jumping statue that has a three level platform on its head that holds a number of fireball spitting paper lanterns. Once you survive the boss battle it's time to head back to the top down segment where you must find the travel agent to book your trip to the next level.

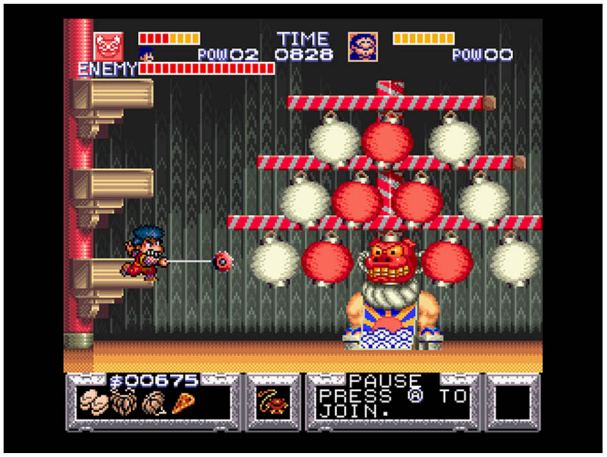
The second level greatly expands on the world, giving you not only multiple paths to fight your way through but also a few shops that let you buy everything from food to replenish your health to upgraded armor to bombs. While you can earn money by picking up coins from fallen foes, you can really make some money by hitting up the mini-games.

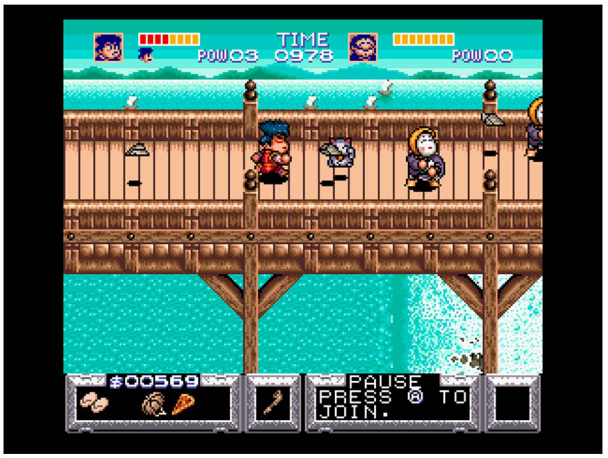
And when I say mini-games, I mean mini-games. Like exploration? Then try the first person treasure filled maze. Like the carnival? Then visit the carnival booth and try your hand at whack-a-mole and the ball toss. Have a good memory? Then try your hand at the concentration card game. Have your heart set on something else? Then you can try the lottery, or lay down some bets at the horse track, or go on the quiz game show, or just hit the arcade and play some air hockey. As a matter of fact if you find the right door you can even play the first level of Gradius. Seriously, you can spend more time playing mini-games than you do actually playing the main game.

Of course shops and mini-games aren't the only things you'll find scattered across the levels. There are saunas and hotels to regain health, fortune tellers that can..well..give you your fortune, as well as judo masters that will share their skills with you for a small fee. While the judo is only good on that specific level, it will allow you to use the scrolls you have collected along the way to unleash a devastating special attack. These can range from riding around on a tiger to shooting lightening bolts from your fingertips. But really, who needs special attacks when your standard attack is devastating.

While it may not look like much, your main weapon packs a heck of a punch. You start out with a small club, but by finding porcelain kitty cats (seriously) you can upgrade your weapon two times. The first upgrade is a club that is twice as long as your original one, but the final upgrade is a spiked yo-you that has an even longer reach. The latter two weapons can even go through multiple targets. The downside is that if you are hit while not wearing any armor your weapon goes down a notch, but even then you can still take out virtually everything with a single blow.





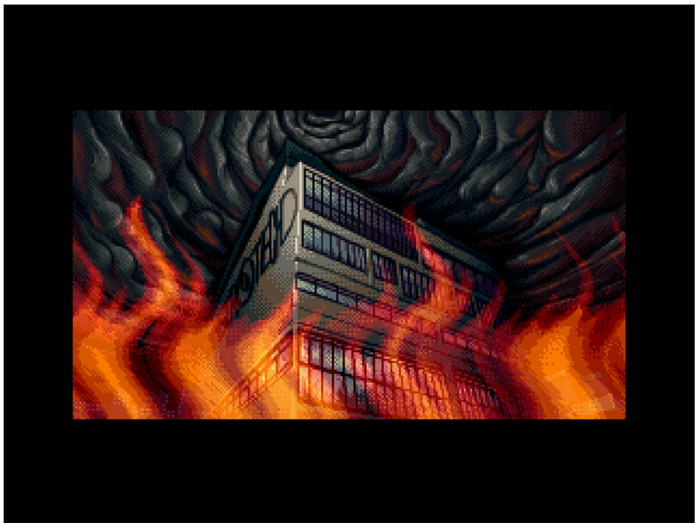


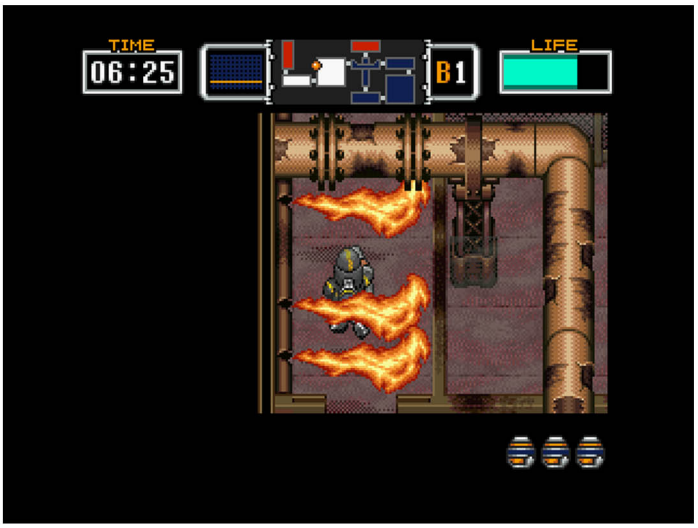
I know all of the above sounds like a great time, however once your friend hits start on his controller the real fun begins. Every single thing in the game is built for the two player experience. All of the mini-games, all of the boss fights, and even the regular stages are more fun because not only can you take on the throngs of enemies together but you can really join forces by having your friend jump on your back so you two can execute the devastating piggy back attack.

Even though there is a lot of gaming goodness to be found here, there are a few problems. The biggest problem is that on the non-linear portions of the levels when you die you automatically respawn right where you fell. This might not sound like a problem until you realize that you aren't invincible for any amount of time, which means as soon as you start a new life chances are you going to take a few hits. The other thing that on some levels the only way to proceed is to buy a certain item which can require you to run back and forth on a screen and kill countless common enemies until you get up enough gold. These aren't major problems by and stretch of the imagination and don't take too much away from the game.

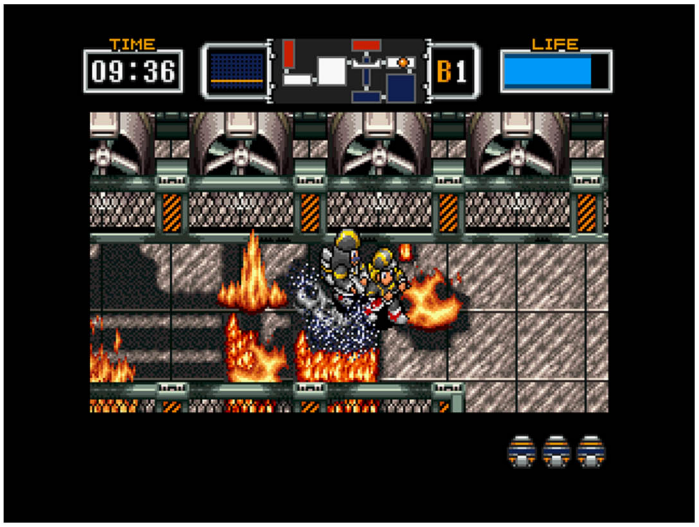
When you combine all of the elements above, you end up with one of the best games of the era.

Have you ever wanted to be a big burly fireman with an epic mustache? How about run through a burning building putting out fires and rescuing people? Have you spent the bulk of your life in front of the TV playing video games and drinking Mountain Dew and no longer have the physical ability to get off the couch without wheezing? Well if the answer to those questions is yes, then The Firemen is the answer to your prayers.





The game begins with a fire breaking out during the Christmas party of the Metrotech Chemical Company in New York City. When our hero Pete (the aforementioned mustached burly fireman) arrives on the scene he is told by the manager that there is a dangerous chemical called MDL in the basement, and that if exposed to extreme heat for a prolonged period of time it would explode in a most spectacular way. After a moments thought a plan is formed and Pete springs into action. So what is the plan? Well for some reason it is decided that the best way to solve the issue at hand is for Pete and his right hand man Danny to fight their way to the basement to collect the MDL, carry it through the burning building and onto the roof so that way when it explodes it will crack the water tanks thereby flooding the building and saving the day. Now I'm not a fireman, but to me it might be a bit easier (and wiser) to simply hop on the fire truck ladder, have it drop someone off on the roof, let them crack the water tanks and let it extinguish the fire. I guess simply fighting fires and rescuing people isn't enough of a thrill for Pete, he has to add "carrying explosive chemicals through a burning building" to the mix.



So now that the borderline suicidal plan has been decided on, it's time to get down to fighting fires. As Pete you can fight them two different ways. You have a long range stream of water than can take down most of the larger flames, as well as a close range attack that soaks the floor beneath your feet and takes out those pesky smaller flames. While it isn't a requirement to put out all the flames you should at least make an effort to take out a significant portion of them since your health is refilled based on how much of the fire you put out. You also have your partner Danny who will rush head first into the fire and start hacking away at it with a pickaxe, as well as other members of your team that will give you valuable information and directions via radio.

At the start of each level you are given an objective via the radio, you then must fight your way through the fire and the flames while rescuing any helpless victims you may come across until you reach the boss. Now one would assume that a boss in a game about firemen would be some inanimate object that is engulfed in flames that must be put out, or some daring rescue set piece. Well if you did assume that, you would be wrong. The bosses are all sentient fire monsters that not only ramps up the difficultly level, but also feels a bit out of place.

Don't get me wrong, the boss fights are entertaining as well as challenging, but they are just out of place in a game like this. Take the first level for example, where you have to fight fires, find an alternate route to the basement because a staircase has been blocked, then crawl under some streams of fire in order to avoid a massive fire wall, then all of a sudden you are in the Legend of Zelda facing off against a fire monster. Sure there are some moving flames during the level, but it is believable enough and doesn't take you out of the firefighting mindset. It is by no means a crippling flaw, and in fact I can see where some people would view this as a positive move, but frankly I would have rather stayed immersed in the role of the firefighter and not have taken a break to fight a giant fire monster.

While there are six levels, the entire game takes place in the Metrotech Chemical Company. This is a great choice on the part of the designers because it really gets you engulfed in the game and makes you feel like you are a part of the action. With each objective you complete you get deeper into the situation, which means when something goes wrong and your initial plan doesn't work you are invested in it, especially because when something does go wrong it usually results in Pete and Danny trapped in a flame engulfed room with no clear path to safety. It's this sense of danger that really ties the entire game up nicely and makes it one of the true hidden gems of the 16-Bit era.

Of course the biggest contributing factor to The Firemen being a hidden gem is that the game was never released in the US market, only in Japan and in Europe. It's a shame really since given the quality of the game, the great graphics, the outside the box setting, this could have been a big hit here. But hey, thanks to the combination of ebay and emulation the greatness can easily be experienced today, even if it is nearly 15 years late.

In what is essentially the TurboGrafx-16 version of Contra, you control one of two rough and tumble Rambo wannabes as they kill an untold number of enemy soldiers on a quest to rescue the President. It still remains a mystery as to why in games like this they only send a lone hero to save the President, but hey, I guess it makes sense to the Generals. At least I hope it does...

The action is fast and furious with a never ending stream of soldiers to kill. The enemies are pretty basic, ranging from the worthless Green Soldier who randomly fires a shot at you to the Blue Soldier that randomly fires a machine gun at you. There are a couple of standard enemies that are worth noting however; the motorcycle guy and the suicide bomber. The suicide bomber is self explanatory (at least it should be), but the motorcycle guy is extra nice because if you can pick him off with your machine gun, you can jack his ride and go all Steve McQueen on the enemy. Yep, that's right, you can reenact the famous scene from The Great Escape and jump your motorcycle over barbed wire barricades. Actually, thanks to some wonderful engineering, you can jump your bike over just about anything. I'm not a physics major, but I'm pretty sure you can't be at a standstill and make your motorcycle jump ten feet in the air over a cliff. I could be wrong though...

The difficulty isn't overwhelming, but thanks to a short three hit life bar you will watch in vain as your super soldier crumples over in a heap after failing to dodge the constant stream of bullets. Thankfully you have an unlimited supply of continues, as well as a fair amount of checkpoints throughout the levels, so with a little bit of work you should see the end credits.

Each of the 8 levels all play out in pretty much the same way. You shoot bad guys while rescuing hostages and picking up more powerful weapons like shotguns and rocket launches which help you take out the multiple bosses that range from a big shotgun wielding guy with armored guards to a submarine that shoots torpedoes at you. And oh yeah, sometimes the side scrolling action becomes vertical scrolling action. This adds a little bit of variety, but not a lot.

But you know what, who needs variety in a game like this? You don't go see the Incredible Hulk movie to see a thought provoking story line do you ? Of course not, you go see a Hulk movie because you want to see a big angry green guy break stuff. Just like you don't play a run and gun game for variety, you play it to take out your aggression on the army of a nameless country and make an entire generation of their children grow up without a father.

(Side Note: For the record I have successfully banished the Ang Lee version of the Hulk from my memory, which is why the previous paragraph works in my mind. Yes I realize that the Edward Norton version wasn't anything to write home about, but it delivered on the simple premise of a giant angry green guy running around breaking stuff, while all the Ang Lee version delivered on was making you wonder about how messed up people in Hollywood can be. Seriously, you have to wonder about an industry that looks at a story about a giant green angry dude that breaks stuff and thinks "You know, I think this would work great as a Shakespearean tragedy". Of course this is from the same industry that thought Aliens Vs. Predator should be a PG-13 film. But that's another rant for another time...)

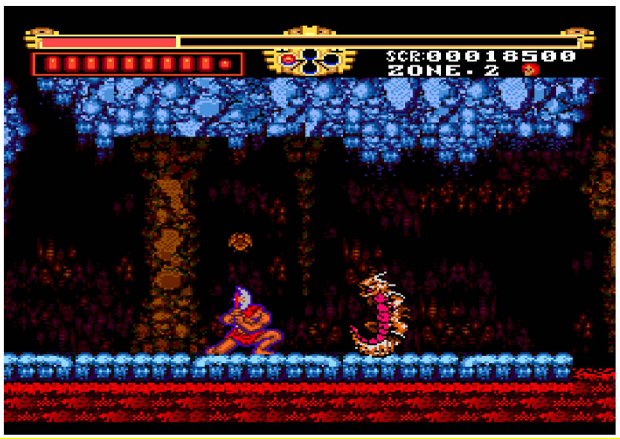
Basically if you own a TurboGrafx and want to revisit a simpler time when you could reduce an entire platoons worth of soldiers to nothing more than bloody messes and not have to hear news stories about how video game violence is corrupting the kids, then this is certainly a great way to go.

Legendary Axe puts you in control of an axe wielding caveman that must hack his way through numerous prehistoric creatures in order to save a friend from becoming a human sacrifice. Sadly the game isn't anywhere near as cool as the concept.

The first thing you are going to notice is that your loin cloth wearing caveman has a major size problem when it comes to his axe. With the title "Legendary Axe" you would expect the hero to be wielding an enchanted axe that was the size of a tall midget. Instead our caveman is wielding more of a "Legendary Hatchet", which makes him look more like Lizzie Borden rather than a legendary hero. Size issues aside, he does know how to do some damage with his axe, which is a good thing since the enemies are plentiful, not to mention bizarre.

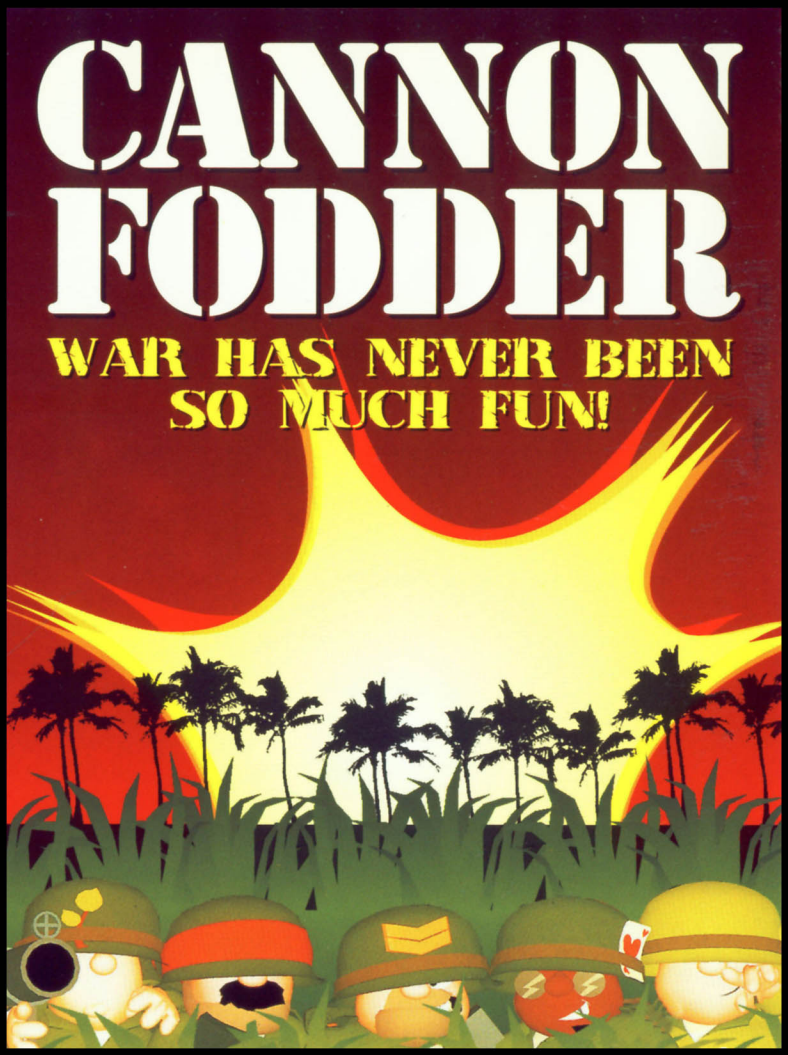
OK, to be fair the common enemies are pretty standard for a game like this. You have your axe wielding orcs, as well as a wide variety of flying creatures (Birds, bats, butterflies. Yes, butterflies). Some of your enemies do start approaching the bizarre threshold, like the giant rock creature or the giant web spewing spider, but nothing compares to the oddity that are the bosses. Take the first two bosses for example. After fighting through vampire bats and axe wielding orcs you face off against two giant bears (if only we had listened to Stephen Colbert). Now I know you are probably thinking that fighting two constantly jumping giant bears isn't that bizarre, and on it's own you are correct, but when you combine it with the fact that the second boss is a giant radioactive boulder that rolls back and forth (seriously) then you have to start wondering what the designers were thinking.

The strangeness of the enemies really isn't that big of an issue, however there are plenty of problems to be found here. The biggest is that the controls leave a lot to be desired. Sure it's easy to walk up to something and hatchet it to death, but god forbid you try and jump over anything. Jumping is very difficult, so of course they make sure that you have tons of bottomless pits to leap over. If that weren't bad enough, whenever you get hit you get thrown back with such force that you'd swear your caveman was a part of the Jackie Chan wire stunt team. Seriously he'll fly back about half the screen, which is a big deal since more often than not he'll end up flying right back into a bottomless pit. Add that in with the fact that you only have 3 continues and the overwhelming majority of players will never see the ending unless they get really familiar with the "save state" feature on an emulator.



There are some good things about the game however, most notably the nifty powerup system. When you first start out most enemies will take multiple hits with your hatchet in order to kill. As you progress however you'll come across powerups that will allow you to automatically charge your strikes giving you more power. The more of these powerups you find, the stronger your attacks will be. The downside to this is that when you die you lose a level of powerup, and when you are fully charged you start glowing like you are some sort of prehistoric raver kid. Also, it can be quite satisfying to hack a few orcs to death, not to mention exacting revenge on those birds (Sorry, Ninja Gaiden scarred me for life when it comes to birds in video games. Seriously, I still have nightmares about some of those encounters.).

This is really one of those video game oddities that doesn't make much sense to me. Virtually every review of this game elevates this to, well, legendary status. Actually now that I think about it every time I ever hear someone talk about Legendary Axe it is talked about like it is one of the all time greats. While the game is decent enough to warrant a try from Action game fans, I honestly have no idea where all of this praise comes from. The only thing I can come up with is that it is a combination of a small Turbo-Grafx library and nostalgia.



While the concept of a fast paced point and click war game that features tiny, almost cute looking soldiers that roam around a war zone leaving a trail of destruction in their wake might not sound like a fun time, Canon Fodder somehow beats the odds and offers up a fun and original take on video game warfare.

The story is pretty much the same as most real life wars. You are going into battle with an unknown enemy for unknown reasons and with inadequate equipment. Also like real war the longer your soldiers survive in battle the higher up the ranks they climb. Granted the only thing that a higher rank gets them is a nicer tombstone on the hill of fallen heroes, but hey, that's something right? Of course you shouldn't expect your soldiers to climb too high up the ranks considering the game is called Canon Fodder.

Thankfully the game is nice enough to provide you with a large number of fodder. Before each mission a nice big batch of new recruits come running over the hill to get in line for combat operations. In a somewhat morbid twist, the new recruits must wait in the shadow of the hill of fallen heroes, watching as the number of tombstones gets larger while the number of people in front of them gets smaller. Somehow I doubt if there is much of a problem with line cutters here.

(Side Note: Seriously, who thought it was a good idea to have the new recruits wait in front of the cemetery? I mean how long would it take for them to build a privacy fence? Or better yet, how long would it take an enemy spy to go in under cover of darkness and put up a few fake headstones with "Your Name Here" written on it? Talk about your psychological warfare.)

The game is broken into 24 missions, which can have as many as 6 different segments to work your way through. Each segment puts you in control of up to 6 soldiers and has specific goals that must be accomplished which can be anything from kidnapping an enemy leader to blowing up all of their buildings to the ever popular kill everything that moves. While the last one is certainly fun, it can be easier said than done thanks to the ever increasing strength of the enemy army.

In the early going the enemy are pretty spread out and are nothing more than soldiers that will run at you while opening fire. These soldiers are easily reduced to blood soaked stains on the battle field (seriously, despite looking cute these tiny soldiers die in a very graphic and agonizing way). Before long however your troops are going to be running for cover since they are going to be facing off with everything from snipers to tanks to attack helicopters to heavily fortified rocket firing turrets. Luckily along the way you can occasionally commandeer some of these vehicles, but more often than not you are going to have to rely on finding cover and getting a lucky shot in with a grenade or rocket. Well, you might get lucky a lucky shot in with one of those, assuming of course you can find them on the battlefield. Seriously, the military can afford to build a massive cemetery in plain view of the recruits but they don't have enough to buy a few high explosives?

Unlike virtually every single action game ever to come out on a console, the control scheme here is point and click, and even though you are stuck with a D-pad rather than a mouse, the controls are spot on. You have one button to tell your soldiers where to move and another one that unleashes a hail of machine gun fire. Once you get used to the controls you'll be running for cover while gunning down enemies all around you with ease.

The difficulty level can get pretty high, however it is a gradual build. You'll have plenty of time to get the hang of things before the true dogs of war are unleashed upon you. There is also a password system to help you, however it is a double edged sword. It's good in the sense that when you make it past a particularly difficult mission you know that you'll probably never have to revisit it again. That said, it is bad because if you lost a ton of troops in that mission you might not have enough new recruits to last until the end of the war. Nothing will make you throw the controller harder against the wall than the realization that you just spent the previous few days fighting a seemingly never ending war only to find that you don't have enough troops to successfully complete the final mission and now must revisit the previous missions that claimed the lives of so many of those cute little soldiers and play them again and again until you can get enough of your men through unscathed so that you have enough warm bodies to soak up shrapnel during the final missions so that you can win the war that nobody seems to know quite why we're fighting.

This is without a doubt one of the most unique action games to ever be released. It is fast paced and frantic, the controls are about as good as they can get, there are plenty of missions to keep you busy, and frankly warfare has never looked so cute. Well, it looks cute until you send a volley of bullets into an enemy soldier which causes him to explode into a sea of crimson while bouncing across the screen.

Canon Fodder was released on multiple console platforms, however in the USA it was only available on the Jaguar and 3DO, which means there were about 13 people in all of the USA that had access to it. There was also a Game Boy Color release, but I can't imagine playing a game that features such small characters on a system with such a small screen. Europe however got ports to both the Genesis and Super Nintendo, which marks one of the few times that European gamers actually got the better end of the bargain. (Note: Images are from the Genesis Version).

Die Hard is without a doubt one of the greatest guy movies in the history of cinema. I mean it contains everything a guy could ever want in a movie. Shootout after shootout? Check. Tough as nails hero wisecracking his way through the never ending stream of terrorists? Check. Boobs? Check (If you blink you'll miss them, but they're there as the terrorists are taking over). Of course leave it to the Japanese to take the simple concept of a lone hero stuck in a high rise filled with terrorists and take it that extra mile. Seriously, by the end of the game you'll reach one of three conclusions.

1. The Japanese got an incredible directors cut of the film.

2. The designers watched nothing but the trailer to the film.

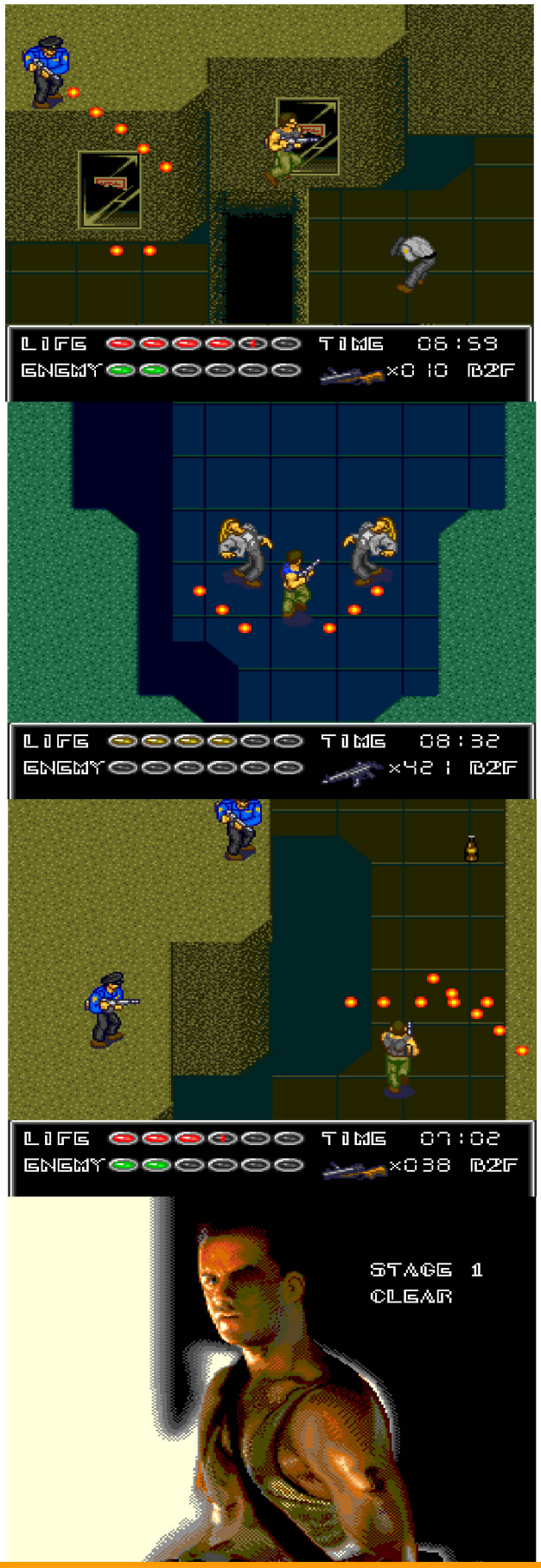
3. The designers saw neither and just had a brief overview of the film told to them by someone who saw part of the trailer while ducking out of the theater for a quick bathroom break before Action Jackson started.

As soon as they hit start (or Run since it is a TurboGrafx game) fans of the movie will be wondering if they are playing the correct game. Instead of starting out the game with a thrilling escape from the terrorists scene, John McClane must first fight his way to Nakatomi Plaza. This involves gunning down dozens of terrorists over two levels, a forrest and a swamp. Anybody who has been to Los Angeles (or seen pictures of it for that matter) will be asking themselves "Is there a swamp or a forrest in downtown L.A. and I just happened to miss it?"

Even though the settings are a bit strange for the first two levels, they are still fun to play. There are plenty of terrorists to kill, and while you start out with nothing but your bare hands it doesn't take long until they drop some high powered weapons. There are a few varieties of machine guns, but things get really fun when they drop a grenade launcher, or better yet, a flame thrower. And yes, I don't remember John McClane mowing down groups of terrorists with a grenade launcher either, but it still doesn't change the fact that it is very satisfying to side step one of their shots before launching a grenade into their face.

Finally after two levels you reach Nakatomi Plaza. Well, you reach the sub basement at any rate. This is where the game takes a pretty big hit, as well as making you wonder just how the building plans were ever approved. Normally if you are in the basement the smart thing to do if you want to go up is to find some stairs and climb them. The Nakatomi Plaza makes that somewhat difficult since the basement levels have apparently been designed by a warlock. Instead of having a door marked "stairs", there are several different pathways and doorways that must be traveled in a specific area before the stairs can be found. One wrong choice and it's back to the entrance for John McClane. The lone upside to this is that it gives you an opportunity to kill even more terrorists.

(Side Note: By the time you reach the end of the third level you will have killed several hundred terrorists. Given that the plot of the film revolved around a high stakes heist, why would they bring along so many people? I mean when projected out the number of terrorists in the game you'll very easily reach a thousand, which by my math would mean that if everything goes off without a hitch every member of the team would walk away with a cool $47. Not exactly worth risking your life over.)



Even though some of the level design choices aren't the greatest, the gameplay is still incredibly fun. As you can see, the action is viewed from the top down perspective, emulating the better points from games like Commando and Gunsmoke. The action is also set at a very high pace. Rarely will you be able to take more than three steps without either someone taking a shot at you or you unloading you weapon at someone. The game only allows for five lives (continues), but thanks to a robust health bar and the abundance of health packs you'll be able to go far on a single life. Speaking of powerups, one of the funniest things about the game is that the additional armor comes in the form of different colored wife beater. Apparently real men don't need armor, just a blue sleeveless shirt.

Die Hard is very playable despite being in Japanese. The only real text of the game is when John McClane mutters something to himself, which is OK because it gives you a chance to imagine him saying "Yippee ki yay, Mr. Falcon." (If you got that reference then you are a true geek. If you didn't, google it). Yes the changes to the story can be annoying to the...I apologize for this...die hard fans of the movie, but it does make you wonder if there is a killer directors cut out there (I don't want to spoil the ending, but let's just say a helicopter and a flame thrower are involved. It's on Youtube if you are interested). If you like your action games fast paced and filled with lots of things to shoot, give Die Hard a shot.

There are a wide variety of reasons why some games that were released in Japan never see the light of day here in the USA. Sometimes the games are deemed too difficult, which was the case with the original Super Mario Brothers 2. Other times the games are too expensive to translate, which was the case with virtually every RPG without the words "Final" and "Fantasy" in the title. However the culprit isn't always difficulty or cost that keeps a game from reaching US store shelves, sometimes it has to do with content. Given that Go Go Ackman puts you in control of a young demon who must set out to do battle with a group of renegade diaper wearing baby angels who are apparently being funded by the unholy alliance of the CIA and a stereotypical 18th century Frenchman angel, I'm going to go out on a limb and say that this title was held overseas due to content.

It's a shame that the game never came out here, because it features some of the best Action Platforming gameplay the Super Famicom has to offer. The levels are very nicely laid out, with plenty of moving platforms and obstacles to overcome, as well as plenty of hidden areas to discover. There are also plenty of enemies to take on, and while the majority of them are the diaper wearing angles and the occasional mini-wolfman, you do get some really out of place ones like the roller skating waitress that is serving bombs. The enemies do expand their arsenal as the game goes along, which means that the angles that were simply running at you in the beginning will be firing missiles from their bows later on in the game.

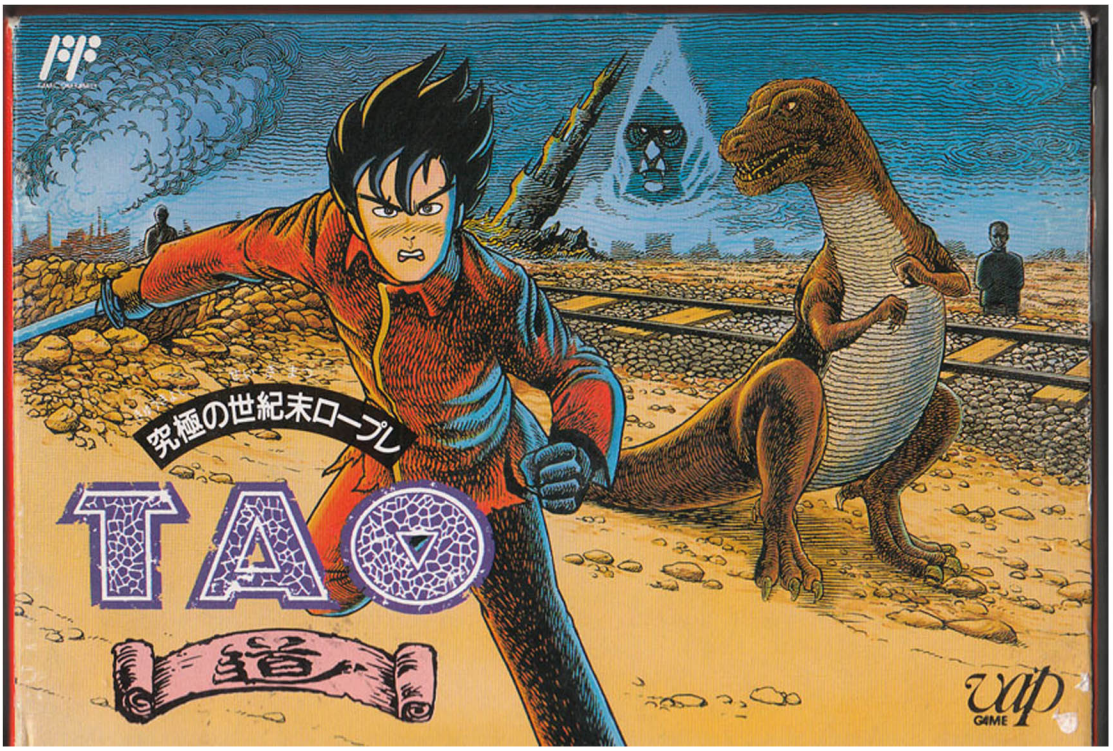
You don't have to worry though because Ackman is a fighting machine. His main attack is an Alex Kidd like giant fisted punch, but unlike Alex Kidd, Ackman is just getting started. Throw in a jump kick, a slide move, and a sweeping leg kick and he's ready to beat up those baby angels. Now I know what you are thinking, sure punching a diaper wearing baby angel in the face is satisfying and all that, but isn't there any other way I can take out my aggression on them? To put it mildly, yes there is. If you look hard enough on these levels you'll find some hidden powerups, like a Dirty Harry type revolver or a boomerang scythe. So you have the option to punch or kick baby angels in the face, blow their heads off or cut them in half, surely that's all right? Well to quote that great thespian Billy Mays "But Wait, There's More!"

You get the opportunity to hop in a convertible, hit some wicked jumps and crush those diaper wearing angels underneath two tons of automobile. Sadly though this level is filled with plenty of spikes as well as a number of walls that will cause an instant death if you don't time your jump just right. So while it is satisfying to control a demon crushing enemies with a convertible, the difficulty on this level will just end up driving you insane. (Wow, did I really just write that incredibly bad pun? My sincerest apologies, won't happen again. At least not in this review...).

You aren't alone in your fight, as you have a red flying dragon demon that helps you along the way by picking up coins and other things that are dropped by your fallen foes. Of course when it comes to helping out with the bosses your flying demon buddy is nowhere to be seen. Luckily the bosses are pretty straightforward and easy to defeat. Be it a gun toting CIA guy or a giant werewolf, all that is required are a few well placed jump kicks to the face and they will go down for good.

The game is completely playable even though the story is in Japanese, but given the visuals it's pretty safe to assume that the actual story won't be anywhere near as good as the one that you come up with yourself. Also, if you really get into this game there are two additional sequels that came out on the Super Famicom.

For the first "I wish I knew Japanese" game we take a look at Detonator Organ for the Sega Mega CD. A quick glance of the cover will get any gaming/anime geek excited. There is a giant mech, a hot anime chick with a non-natural hair color, a giant mech, a couple of standard anime guys who will no doubt battle in some epic way, and oh yeah, did I mention the giant mech? The geekdom continues once you put the disc in as you are greeted with a fairly lengthy anime opening, which is followed by what is essentially an interactive Manga. Not only an interactive Manga, but an interactive Manga with epic music and complete voice over work. Of course it's right about here that you realize that if you don't speak Japanese you aren't going to see past a few screens, which is a shame because from the looks of it the game looks like a choose your own adventure type, which would be a nice change of pace from the standard action adventure games.



For the other "I Wish I Knew Japanese" selection we take a look at Tao for the Famicom. From what I can tell it is a typical 8-Bit RPG, however there is something on the box that makes this game stand apart from the rest. Dinosaurs. Not just dinosaurs, but if you look closely at the screenshot in the bottom righthand corner you'll see that the hero is riding a giant dinosaur down some railroad tracks. If that's not awesome I don't know what is. In addition to riding dinosaurs you'll come across everything from railroad workers to monks to some scary guy with an epic Fu Manchu mustache who apparently wants to sell you stuff. I would love to tell you more about the game, but given the fact that it has a crippling level of Japanese text I haven't been able to figure out how to make much progress. If you know Japanese, or are a level 5 masochist, then by all means give this a shot. However if you are neither I would suggest admiring the screenshots and wondering what an RPG centered around a monk run dinosaur railroad company would be like.